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Teaser

[image]

***

"She was murdered," he said bluntly, "We don't know who, only that whoever it was has razor sharp claws."

***

He growled and launched himself at the orange tom, claws outstretched, groping for his throat.

***

He crept forward like he was stalking prey. The younger warrior apologized again. He just hissed. "You have one more chance," he growled, "Then come the consequences."

***

"You!" He roared. "What have you done to my Clan? You undermined me. You're trying to overthrow me. I will not allow such madness in my Clan! I will kill you!"

***

"You have no idea what I've gone through. I've lost everything. My mother, my dream of becoming a warrior, my close relationship with my brother, my *happiness*, for StarClan's sake. Everything I've ever known is *gone*! I bet you didn't know what it was like to lose your mother when you were *four moons old*. I know when my father is going to die. I know what my brother's warrior name is going to be, and who his mate is going to be.
"I know how your former mate died. I know she hates you and

wants nothing to do with you and that she only ever loved Vinestripes. I know a lot of things that a seven moon old cat shouldn't ever have to bear the weight of knowing. I know about your secrets. I hate being a medicine cat apprentice and I hate Willowleaf. I hate the musty smell of the medicine den. I hate how I'm treated every day of my life: like I'm some kind of burr stuck in someone's pelt.

"I hate my life, and I hate this Clan. And you know what, I hate *you*. I hate you more than anything else because you are part of the reason I'm treated like a piece of dirt all the time. I hate how your decision made my life horrible. I hate how *I'm* shamed because of the decision *you* made. I'm done. I've had enough. I've had enough of being treated terribly, like I don't deserve to live here. You probably hate me because I'm the *spawn* of your former mate's brother. I hate you more than anything. I hate you!"

***

He crawled to edge of the stream, considering it. He looked down into the dark, swirling water.

Then, he did it.

He threw himself in.

***

Suddenly the dark tom brought his paws smashing down on his mouth. His jaw cracked. Pain exploded again. Then everything was dull. It seemed as though what was happening wasn't even real. But he knew that it was because his jaw, neck, and spine hurt too bad. He had long since given up fighting. The only thing he was fighting now was losing his second to last life.

***

He wasn't thinking clearly. She would have never done that to him. She truly loved him. She had always loved him. She wouldn't make him suffer. He embraced the darkness. He would finally be with his mates and brother again. His pain dulled. He was tired, so tired. He would rest now. Then he thought of his kits. He had to stay alive. It was too late now. Her face was sorrowful now. The last words he heard before he slipped into the darkness were, "I'm sorry."

Note

Please tell me if there are any mistakes, or any questions that you have @kittycode5

Please be nice!

Tell me who your favorite character is! Whichever character has the most votes will be featured as a main character in the next book. (Scrap that, I've already chosen them, LOL)

Warning: there will be forbidden love :)

I will try to release a new chapter every week. Sometimes there might be more, sometimes less.

Votes, comments, and follows are always appreciated!

I've had so much fun writing about and developing these characters. Some may be based on real people, while others are purely from my imagination. Thanks for reading! I hope you like it!

Story - "Speech"

Thoughts

Dreams/Flashbacks - Speech/"*Speech*"

-Fawn

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN
Leader Lightstar- pure white tom with green eyes

Deputy Stormheart- gray tom with green eyes

Medicine Cat Willowleaf- pale brown she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Barkpaw

Warriors Icewing- white she-cat with black paws, ear-tips, and tail-tip with one blue eye and one green eye
Apprentice, Darkpaw
Stoneclaw- gray tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Redpaw
Flamepelt- pale orange tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Rainpaw
Whitetail- reddish-brown she-cat with a white tail-tip and hazel eyes
Tigerstripe- a dark tabby tom with yellow eyes
Foxcatcher- a flaming orange tom with pale green eyes
Ashclaw- pale gray tabby tom with copper eyes
Apprentice, Dustpaw
Oakpool- dark brown mackerel tabby with lemon yellow eyes
Russetbreeze- russet colored tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Sandypaw
Cheetahstride- yellow spotted tabby tom with brown eyes
Mouseblaze- pale brown ticked tabby she-cat with yellow eyes
Hollypelt- black she-cat with green eyes
Briarpool- tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes

Apprentices Barkpaw- dark brown tabby tom with golden yellow eyes
Darkpaw- black she-cat with pale yellow eyes
Redpaw- pale brown tom with one reddish foot and yellow eyes

Rainpaw- pale gray she-cat with blue eyes
Dustpaw- dusky brown tom with pale brown eyes
Sandypaw- pale brown she-cat with green eyes

Queens Snowtail- pure white she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Foxcatcher's kits, Moonkit- pure white tom with blue eyes, deaf in one ear, Sunkit- golden tom with amber eyes)
Littleleaf- tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes (Mother to Tigerstripe's kits, Lionkit- golden tom with green eyes, Sparrowkit- tortoiseshell tom with green eyes)
Pinefrost- dark gray she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Eaglefall's kits, Splashkit- gray-blue tom with blue eyes, Dewkit- pale gray she-cat with green eyes, Cloudkit- white tom with blue eyes)

Elders Smalltail- dark brown tom with copper eyes
One-ear- golden she-cat with blue eyes

RIVERCLAN

Leader Cranestar- orange-and-white tom with green eyes

Deputy Pantherfur- black she-cat with Pacific blue eyes

Medicine Cat Birdtail- tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Thrushpaw

Warriors Twistedclaw- pale gray tom with amber eyes
Tornclaw- gray mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes
Bluetail- blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Whitepaw
Sorrelstream- pale gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes
Flashmask- white tom with a dark gray face and chest with blue eyes
Sleekpelt- black she-cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Mistypaw
Jaystorm- dark gray tom with green eyes
Oneleg- black tom with one white paw and hazel eyes
Apprentice, Flintpaw
Leopardwhisker- leopard spotted yellow she-cat with amber eyes

Peachlight- black she-cat with orange eyes
Lilyleaf- flaming orange she-cat with pale green eyes
Apprentice, Blackpaw
Riverstorm- massive dark gray, almost black tom with Pacific blue eyes

Apprentices Thrushpaw- calico tom with pale green eyes
Whitepaw- blue-gray she-cat with a white spot on her forehead and striking green eyes
Mistypaw- pale gray she-cat with white patches and pale blue eyes
Flintpaw- light gray tom with hazel eyes
Blackpaw- black tom with yellow eyes

Queens Mouseleaf- brown she-cat with yellow eyes (Mother to Jaystorm's kits)
Sandtail- sandy-gray she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Cranestar's kits, Daisykit- golden she-cat with blue eyes, Lilykit- golden she-cat with amber eyes, Daffodilkit- golden she-cat with green eyes)
Grassjump- pale brown she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Flashmask's kits, Frostkit- deaf and blind white tom with blue eyes, Hollowkit- sandy brown she-cat with green eyes)

Elders Hollyheart- light brown tom with hazel eyes

SHADOWCLAN

Leader Swiftstar- black-and-white tom with orange eyes

Deputy Feathermoss- pale gray tom with ice blue eyes

Medicine Cat Finchnose- dark brown tom with yellow eyes

Warriors Crowwing- black tom with green eyes
Nectarflight- dark gray agouti tabby she-cat with pale green eyes
Frogleap- pale brown tom with ginger patches and green eyes
Alderfern- brown ticked tabby tom with hazel eyes
Apprentice, Minnowpaw
Adderheart- gray-and-white tom with green eyes

Ginger (Former kittypet) - ginger she-cat with amber eyes
Nightmoon- tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Ravenlight- deaf white tom with blue eyes
Yarrowcloud- yellow she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Stripepaw
Acorntail- reddish-brown she-cat with golden yellow eyes
Vinestripes- pale gray tom with pale green eyes
Apprentice, Weedpaw
Cherryblossom- tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentices Minnowpaw- blue-gray she-cat with deep blue eyes and darker stripe along her back
Stripepaw- silver-gray tom with dark stripes along his back and blue eyes
Weedpaw- yellow tom with amber eyes

Queens Petalheart- calico she-cat with pale brown eyes with darker flecks in them (Mother to Feathermoss' kit, Fawnkit- calico she-cat with yellow eyes)
Tawnysnow- white she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Adderheart's kits, Archkit- gray tom with hazel eyes, Otterkit- gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes)

Elders Orchidpelt- tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes
Larchbelly- black tom with blue eyes

WINDCLAN

Leader Badgerstar- black-and-white tom with hazel eyes
Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Deputy Sageflame- fiery orange she-cat with emerald green eyes

Medicine Cat Deerstep- dark brown tabby she-cat with copper eyes
Ryegaze- reddish-brown tom with amber eyes

Warriors Smallclaw- small white tom with red splotches and pale green eyes

Sandfang- sandy tom with brown eyes; unusually long front tooth
Dewspeck- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Rookpaw
Loudwhistle- deep brown tom with yellow eyes
Tangleclaw- gray tom with white patches and pale blue eyes; clumsy, hence his name
Bumbleshine- blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes
Honeysong- honey-colored she-cat with warm amber eyes
Hawkflight- dark brown tabby tom with yellow-orange eyes
Rabbithop- orange agouti tabby tom with green eyes
Apprentices Cedarpaw- brown she-cat with copper eyes
Rookpaw- black tom with yellow eyes

Queens Tansyfrost- yellow she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Dewspeck's kits)
Shimmersplash- silvery gray she-cat with blue eyes (Mother to Hawkflight's kits, Shrewkit- brown tom with yellow eyes, Runningkit- dark gray tom with yellow eyes, Hailkit- silver tom with blue eyes)

Elders Blizzardpelt- white tom with one blue eye and one green eye

SKYCLAN

Leader Brackenstar- bright orange tom with a brown tail-tip, white paws, and green eyes; very small

Deputy Shellshine- silvery gray she-cat with pale blue eyes

Medicine Cat Sedgefur- elderly brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes
Bloomshade- tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Mossypaw

Warriors Mistpelt- pale gray she-cat with one white paw and yellow eyes
Scorchstripe- bright orange tom with a large black stripe across his back and yellow eyes

Apprentice, Beepaw
Timbernose- brown tabby tom with amber eyes
Pebblefall- dark gray, spike-furred she-cat with a white tail-tip and blue eyes
Talonstrike- large pale gray-and-white tom with pale green eyes
Apprentice, Jaggedpaw
Starlingflight- pale brown tom with cool amber eyes
Weaselspeck- dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes
Nutleg- dark brown tom with white patches and dark brown, almost black eyes
Fallowspot- white she-cat with green eyes
Apprentices Mossypaw- beautiful ticked tabby she-cat with warm hazel eyes
Beepaw- orange-and-white tom with green eyes
Jaggedpaw- pale gray-and-white tom with blue eyes; blind in one eye

Queens Dawnmist- cream colored she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Brackenstar's kits)

Elders Goldenspring- golden she-cat with amber eyes
Dusklight- dark brown mackerel tabby tom with copper eyes

THE ADVISORY

ThunderClan- Eaglefall- large golden tom with one blue eye and one green eye
RiverClan- Mapletuft- small, dark ginger she-cat with copper eyes
ShadowClan- Hickoryshine- white-and-gray patched she-cat with gray-blue eyes
WindClan- Rosepatch- cream-colored she-cat with a red splotch on her cheek and green eyes
SkyClan- Darkmist- dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
Apprentices Turtlepaw- tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes
Featherpaw- pale gray tom with sky-blue eyes
Pearpaw- yellow she-cat with hazel eyes
Swallowpaw-white she-cat with green eyes
Specklepaw- spotted tabby tom with amber eyes
Kits Heatherkit
Reedkit

Leopardkit
Cricketkit
Lunakit
Hazelkit
Petalkit
Hillkit
Fernkit
Rowankit
Meadowkit
Larkkit
Wildkit
Birchkit
Doekit

THE DESCENDANTS

Leader Light Feather (Light)
Successors Calm Brook (Calm)
Stormy Sky (Stormy)
Thorny Brambles (Thorny)
She-cats Ember Sparks (Ember)
Furious Eagle (Fury)
Holly Berry (Holly)
Falling Rain (Rain)
Sandy Rocks (Sandy)
Green Leaf (Green)
Snowy Frost (Snowy)
Dewy Grass (Dewy)
New Moon (Moon)
Melting Ice (Ice)
Toms Jagged Roots (Jag)
Sharp Stones (Sharp)

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS

The Growler- crabby, matted, mangy-furred tom with dark, murky eyes; his fur color is
indistinguishable because of how dirty and mangy he is

Prologue

As ThunderClan crossed the bridge onto the Gathering island, a mottled brown and white she-cat looked eagerly for a dark gray warrior. As soon as she saw him, she bounded across the clearing towards him. "My love," she breathed. The gray tom purred in delight, and rubbed his muzzle against hers. "You're here," he meowed, softly. They walked along the edge of the island together, unaware that one small orange tom was watching them.

He watched how tenderly they treated each other and how they truly seemed to love each other. "I wish I knew who my parents were," he sighed, "No one will tell me, like it's a secret or something. Maybe nobody knows." He laid his bright orange head on his white paws, and tried to listen to the Clan leaders share their news. When the SkyClan leader, Duskstar began to speak, the orange tom listened because, after all, he was in SkyClan too, and that was a good Clan to be in.

I wish I were a Clan leader, he thought, *Because then* I *could address all of the Clans! Me, Brackenpaw, an apprentice. But then I would be Brackenstar, chosen by StarClan!* Suddenly he had a thought. *My parents must look a little like me, right? Maybe my mother or father has a brown tip to their tail, like me!* He looked around the clearing. *No one,* he wanted to yowl, *No one! Wait! There's one!* The mottled brown and white she-cat that he had seen earlier had a brown tip to her tail! Suddenly he knew who his parents were. The RiverClan medicine cat, and a ThunderClan tom.

Me and my brother Lightpaw, in ThunderClan are halfClan kits! I've got to tell him next time I see him! We're the only ones besides our parents who know that we're siblings...wait...that means Thrushpaw, the RiverClan medicine cat apprentice, is our younger brother! Brackenpaw got up and scanned the clearing for his brother, Lightpaw. *There he is! I need to tell him!* Brackenpaw rushed across the island towards his brother, "Lightpaw! Lightpaw," he hissed. His brother turned around, "What?" He mewed.

"Come here." Brackenpaw urged. He danced on his paws excitedly, "Come on!" Lightpaw came over, "What do you need? We're in the middle of a Gathering, you know."

"I know, I know! Listen to this. So you know how I have a brown tip to my tail? 'Well', I thought, 'One of our parents must have a brown tip like me.' So I looked around the clearing, and bam! I realized who our parents are!"

"Who? Who?!" Lightpaw cried, "Who are they?"

"Well, our father is in your Clan. He's dark gray. Do you know who that is?" Brackenpaw inquired.

"It could be Stormheart, our deputy. But he has a mate...S—Stoneclaw?! No, he would never be disloyal! But there's no one else."

"It has to be one of them!" Brackenpaw said, "Anyway our mother is in RiverClan. In fact, I'm pretty sure she's the medicine cat."

Lightpaw gave a confused look, "I don't know her name," he said, "But I'll tell you if I find out. Okay?"

"Okay!" Brackenpaw agreed readily, "I promise I will try to find out." They watched their parents for a few moments in silence.

I'll do whatever it takes to find out the truth. I promise I will find out my brother, I promise you this thing, if nothing else. I promise I will find our parents and protect our secret. I promise.

"I Miss You Already"

[image]

•Sunkit•

Sunkit blinked open his eyes to see his brother, Moonkit standing over him. Moonkit paced back and forth like he was waiting for something. "What do you want?" Sunkit growled, "I'm trying to sleep." Moonkit bounced on the soft, mossy nest beneath him. "You finally opened your eyes!" Sunkit shut his eyes.

"Get away," he mewed, "I don't want to open my eyes yet." Moonkit purred in amusement. He stopped running around and licked his snow white paw. "Oh, but you've got to. Come out and see the world!" His mother, Snowtail, appeared above him. She picked up Sunkit and swung him in her jaws. He could feel her rumbling purr against his thick, golden pelt. He batted his small paws against the air in an effort to get back in his nest. Snowtail simply walked outside of the nursery into the bright sunshine.

Sunkit blinked open his eyes and immediately shut them against the sunlight streaming into the camp. He carefully pried his eyes open again to adjust to brightness of the mid day sun. He heard gasps from the cats who weren't on a patrol, but sitting lazily in the sunshine. Sunkit sniffed the air to see if he recognized any of the scents drifting in the open. An overwhelming amount of smells hit his nostrils as he took a deep breath in. He shook his head to clear the aromas out.

Snowtail gently set him on the ground. His small paws collapsed against the cool grass in the clearing. He shook himself off to regain his composure and tried to stand up. His legs wobbled, but he stayed standing. He forced his legs to take a few small steps forward. Snowtail nudged him a little further. "That's it," she murmured, "Keep walking straight ahead. I'll tell you when to stop."

Sunkit took a couple more shaky steps. *It's easier now that I know how,* he thought. He purred and walked a little more confidently. He heard a deep voice somewhere near him. "He's beautiful," he heard the voice say. "What did you name him?" Snowtail purred.

"Guess," she mewed. Sunkit heard a deep purr, presumedly from the low voice. He looked up from the ground and saw a fiery orange tom. The tom glanced at him and purred again. "Amber eyes, too? Let me guess, his name is...Lionkit? No, one of Littleleaf's kits' names is Lionkit. Weaselkit? Spark? Just tell me, please, what's his name?" Snowtail's tail brushed against the grass.

"His brother's name is Moonkit. He's pure white, like me. Now guess." She teased. The orange tom flicked his ear at a fly. He sighed. Then he jerked his muzzle towards Snowtail.

"Brother? He has a brother?" Snowtail licked her paw.

"That's what I said, isn't it? Fine, I'll tell you what his name is and stop my silly games. I called him Sunkit, after his gold pelt." The orange looked down at Sunkit again. He bent down and licked the fur on the top of Sunkit's head, then he purred. "I have not two, but *three* sons of my own!" The tom said proudly. Sunkit gave him a curious look.

"Who are you?" He asked, his voice sounding small in midst of all the cats in the clearing. The orange tom gazed happily at him. "My name is Foxcatcher. I'm your father." Sunkit looked down at his paws and then walked back over to Snowtail. "Why is everyone looking at me?" Snowtail looked around the clearing to see all the furry faces staring at them.

"Because this is your first time out of the nursery. It's your first time walking too." Sunkit gave a slight nod and then something white flashed across his vision. Moonkit turned and growled at Sunkit.

"Last one back to the nursery is rotten squirrel!" He turned around to run to the nursery. Sunkit turned to follow, just barely behind him. He heard Snowtail and Foxcatcher's paw steps behind him and he ran faster, barely tumbling into the nursery before Moonkit. "I

guess you're a rotten squirrel, then." Sunkit mewed, eyes sparkling. He rolled on his back and batted the air half-heartedly. Moonkit growled again and pounced on him. They tumbled right into Snowtail, but they didn't even notice. Snowtail gently batted them away and curled up in her nest.

***

Sunkit open his eyes to white fur. He growled and pushed Moonkit away. He and his brother were four moons old now. Moonkit rolled right back and batted Sunkit's face with his soft, white paws. Sunkit blinked and growled again. "I'll get you for that," he mewed. He jumped up and landed on his brother's back.

"Sheathe your claws, you furball!" Moonkit said. He nipped Sunkit's ear. "Furball yourself," Sunkit retorted. He leapt at his brother and tackled him to the ground. They heard a purr behind them. Sunkit whipped around to see Foxcatcher watching them. "You should try playing moss ball," he meowed.

"Only if you give us badger rides," Sunkit mewed, his eyes sparkling. Foxcatcher gave a *mrow* of laughter.

"You strike a hard bargain." He said. He stood up. Moonkit scrambled onto his back, with Sunkit just behind him. "Not you too," Foxcatcher said, laughing again.

"When I first came out of the nursery, you said that you had three sons. Why did you say that?" Sunkit asked.

"Have you met Flamepelt yet?" Sunkit shook his head. "Flamepelt is from a previous litter."

"Is Snowtail his mother, too?" Moonkit asked. Foxcatcher nodded.

"How come you didn't know that Moonkit was my brother?" Sunkit mused. Foxcatcher glanced at him.

"I had never met you two before then. Snowtail surprised me with having two kits instead of just one."

"Why?" Sunkit tilted his head.

"She wanted it to be a surprise." He mewed. Sunkit nodded, then he leapt at Moonkit again, paws outstretched. Moonkit bared his teeth in a mock snarl. Sunkit fell back, laughing.

A white tom.

A gray tom.

A calico she-cat.

A flash of white and gray.

The calico's eyes wide. Snarling, yowling, claws out, teeth bared. The she-cat leaps into the fray. The toms break apart. The gray tom's ears are shredded, and his tail bleeding. The white tom's claw is wrenched, and he's bleeding from a dozen wounds.

He snarls at the gray cat. The calico murmurs something to him. His eyes narrow. The gray cat growls. The toms snarl at each other. The calico says something indistinguishable. The white cat turns away and sits down to lick his wounds. The gray tom holds his head high, like he won the battle. The calico snarls at him and goes to the white tom. This time she talks louder. Why? *She asks. The white tom hang his head in shame.* We were fighting, *he mews.*

Obviously! *She snarls. He looks at her.*

Over you. *He says. He looks at the gray tom.* I'm sorry, *he mews.*

For what? Trying to steal my mate? *The gray cat snarls. The white tom flicks his ear in surprise.* Mate? *He says. The she-cat jumps up.*

Since when? *She asks angrily to the gray tom. She lashes out at him and growls. He takes a step back, surprised.* What about last night? *He asks. She hisses at him.*

Don't you remember my answer? *She snarls. The gray tom hisses and*

runs away. Moonstorm? *She says, whipping around to find him. She sighs with relief. She purrs and rubs against him.* Fawnleaf, *he says.* Why me? *She purrs again.* Let's go. Our Clans will be wondering where we are.

What about Archleg? *He says. Fawnleaf growls.*

Leave him be. He won't tell. *He glances at her, confused.* Trust me, *she says.*

***

"Sunkit? Sunkit? Are you awake?" Sunkit opened his eyes and sat up groggily.

"Moonkit?" He said. "Where am I?" Moonkit purred.

"You're awake!" He mewed. "You collapsed and fell over. I was worried that you had died!" *I didn't die!* Sunkit thought. *I'm fine!* Foxcatcher loomed into view. He purred when he saw that Sunkit was awake. "Are you okay?" He asked. Sunkit nodded. "What happened?" He mewed. Then it all came flooding back. The toms, the calico, the fighting. "Moonstorm! Fawnleaf!" He blurted. Foxcatcher turned to him. "Are you okay?" He asked again. Sunkit nodded again, though he knew that was a lie. He knew that he had just seen his brother in the future. "Moonstorm," he whispered. Moonkit looked over.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" He mewed. Sunkit shook his head. He almost told Moonkit about his vision. "You wouldn't understand," he whispered hoarsely. *It's you! You! Your warrior name is Moonstorm!* He wanted to yell. *Your mate is going to be Fawnleaf, whoever she is!* He simply sighed and went to his nest.

Sunkit woke up sometime later to Foxcatcher calling his name urgently. He stumbled out of the nursery, blinking his eyes with sleepiness. "Sunkit! Come here, quickly!" Sunkit ran towards Foxcatcher...and a white shape on the ground. Sunkit blinked again. "Snowtail?" He mewed, feeling smaller than ever. Foxcatcher's eyes were wide with something like disbelief. "Sh—she—" he mumbled.

Moonkit looked up from beside the lump.

"She's dead." He mewed bitterly. Sunkit took a step back in horror and shock.

"No!" He screamed, "No, no, no! She can't be! She was fine this morning!" He felt someone come and sit beside him, but he didn't care. All he could focus on was how still and well, *dead*, Snowtail looked. He walked over to where she was lying. He laid against her still, cold fur. "How?" He whispered. The tom who had been sitting beside him came over to him again. It was Flamepelt. "She was murdered," he said bluntly, "We don't know who, only that whoever it was has razor sharp claws."

Sunkit barely heard what Flamepelt said. He felt numb with grief. He stayed near Snowtail's body the rest of the day. He woke up at moonhigh and realized that he had fallen asleep.

"You need to eat," he heard a voice say. Sunkit shook his head and buried himself in Snowtail's fur. He saw dark shapes laying around her body, their noses pressed to her fur. *They're sitting vigil,* he realized. He closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep again.

"I'm worried about him," he heard someone say. *Foxcatcher.* "He hasn't eaten, hasn't spoken, hasn't even *moved*, for StarClan's sake."

"Leave him be, Foxcatcher. He'll recover. All kits do in time. You know Honeydew died when my siblings and I were still apprentices." A she-cat's voice this time.

"I know, I know, Pinefrost. But I'm still worried. How will he cope? He's going to be an apprentice soon. Moonkit isn't acting this way." Pinefrost sighed.

"I'll talk to him tomorrow, okay?" Now it was Foxcatcher who sighed.

"Okay, but he doesn't know you. Who knows how he'll react?"

"He's met me before. Don't forget, we share the nursery. He'll be

okay." Sunkit saw Foxcatcher's silhouette nod in agreement. Then both shadows disappeared. He heard Foxcatcher sigh heavily near him as he laid down by the now stone cold Snowtail. Sunkit sniffed the air. Pinefrost had gone to the dirtplace tunnel. He slowly stood up and followed her. She looked down at him.

"What are you doing awake this late?"

Sunkit swallowed. "I couldn't sleep. I heard you and Foxcatcher talking. Is there something wrong with me?" Pinefrost chuckled and shook her head.

"Foxcatcher is just worried. You're fine, you're just grieving." Sunkit nodded slowly.

"He wanted you to talk with me. Why?"

"He wants me to persuade you to eat and recover quickly."

"But I don't want to go back to being happy just yet. I'm not ready."

"That's okay. I understand. You know, I lost my mother, Honeydew, when I was an apprentice."

Sunkit tilted his head. "Go on," he said.

"It was during a battle against WindClan."

"Those rabbit-chasers!" He interrupted. She ignored him and kept going.

"We were fighting on the side of ShadowClan, because WindClan had invaded their camp for no reason what so ever. During the battle, Honeydew was injured by a warrior named Bumbleshine. Her Clanmate, Smallclaw, thought that Bumbleshine was being a traitor when she let Honeydew go. He didn't realize that she was injured already, so he attacked her. My littermate, Cloudblaze, Cloudpaw at the time, arrived at the scene just as Bumbleshine shrieked at Smallclaw to stop.

"By the time Bumbleshine ran to get my siblings and I, the life was already bleeding out of Honeydew. Nectarpaw, Frogpaw, and I got there a few moments before she died. We heard her make a vow to Bumbleshine. Because Bumbleshine had spared Honeydew's life and tried to save her, we were in debt to her. I don't know about my littermates, but I have never forgotten that vow."

Sunkit was listening wide-eyed. Around them, the wind whistled through the trees. Pinefrost kept talking.

"After the battle, my siblings and I were escorted to the ShadowClan camp. Our father was Vinestar, the leader of ShadowClan at the time. He knew that we were his kits, and we knew that he was our father. He wanted us to come live with him in ShadowClan. His Clanmates were skeptical of having us in their camp, so we had to live in the surrounding pines, separated and guarded, for three moons.

"When we were finally allowed into the camp, the deputy, Applepelt, was very rude to us. Her mate, Redwood, had guarded my brother, Frogpaw. Frogpaw had always been timid, so I was surprised to see him so chipper and *happy* looking. I had never seen him like that before. My sister, Nectarpaw, had formed a strong bond with her guard, Swiftpounce. When I saw Cloudpaw, I noticed that he looked just as unhappy as I felt.

"We were supposed to be made warriors long before then, so Nectarpaw was almost the same age as Swiftpounce. Vinestar gave us the choice between staying in ShadowClan and being made a warrior, or going back to ThunderClan as an apprentice the following morning. I knew that my heart was in ThunderClan, and always would be. I knew Cloudpaw felt the same.

"Nectarpaw and Frogpaw chose to stay in ShadowClan. They became Nectarflight and Frogleap. Swiftpounce is Nectarflight's mate now. The day we were returned to ThunderClan, Swiftpounce became the current leader, Swiftstar. I have no idea how it happened; you would have to ask Nectarflight."

"Ask away," a soft voice near Sunkit asked. Sunkit turned around to

see a dark gray tabby she-cat, who looked just like Pinefrost, standing behind him. Pinefrost just looked confused.

"Nectarflight? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in ShadowClan?"

"I came to visit you. It took me forever to leave because Minnowpaw and Stripepaw were tripping me every moment I walked toward the entrance to the camp. I'm sorry I got here so late. I didn't expect you to be awake." Nectarflight mewed.

"Neither of us could fall asleep. How were you let in?" Pinefrost looked at the guard at the camp entrance anxiously. Nectarflight glanced at Sunkit.

"Stoneclaw let me in. Who's this little kit?" She asked. Sunkit growled in defiance.

"My name is Sunkit, and I am *not* little!" He protested. She gave a *mrow* of amusement.

"Sure," she said, her eyes twinkling, "Hello, Sunkit. I'll tell you the story of how Swiftstar became the leader of ShadowClan, if you like." Sunkit nodded his head for her to go on.

"After Pinefrost and Cloudblaze left, Vinestar announced that he no longer wanted to be ShadowClan's leader. Redwood was the deputy because Applepelt had run off to a different Clan. StarClan knows what happened to her. Redwood was to succeed Vinestar. He chose Swiftpounce to be his deputy. He set off with them and Petalbloom, the medicine cat, to the Moonpool.

"When they reached StarClan, they released Vinestar of his duty as leader and he became Vinestripes, a warrior. Then they told Redwood that they had chosen Swiftpounce instead. He was totally fine with it. Swiftpounce was so confused, as was Petalbloom. Swiftpounce was gifted his nine lives and given the name Swiftstar. His last life was given by Tall Shadow, often known as Shadowstar. Do you know you she is?"

Sunkit shook his head.

"She was the very first leader of ShadowClan."

Sunkit opened his mouth wide in wonder. "Really?" He asked, his eyes big and round. Nectarflight nodded her head. Pinefrost cleared her throat.

"It's time we put you back to bed, Sunkit." She mewed.

"I don't want to!" He wailed.

"It's not a matter of whether you want to or not. I'll come curl up with you though." Pinefrost said. Nectarflight gave a mew of agreement. They trudged back to Sunkit's spot beside Snowtail's body.

"Was she your mother?" Nectarflight asked him. Sunkit nodded.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she murmured softly.

"Thank you," he whispered, "I miss her so much." Nectarflight dipped her head. They settled down together with their noses pressed to Snowtail's cold fur. Sunkit shivered.

"I miss you, Snowtail. I miss you so much."

"What Happened to Us?"

[image]

•Brackenstar•

"Aren't you coming?" The small ginger tom asked timidly.

"I'm sorry, I can't." The orange tom told him. Beepaw looked at him shyly.

"Why not?" He mewed. Brackenstar shook his head.

"I have business to attend," he said. *I feel so bad. Beepaw really wants me to come.*

"Like what?" Beepaw ventured. Brackenstar chuckled.

"You're really going to go there?" He mewed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Beepaw glanced at his paws.

"I can't go because today is the day I visit the Advisory." Beepaw looked up at him.

"Really?" He asked. Brackenstar nodded. Beepaw's eyes grew wide. "What are they like?" He inquired. Brackenstar was silent a moment. *Oh, Beepaw. How can I resist telling you that your father is the representative for SkyClan in the Advisory?* He shook his head again.

"They're honestly a bit scary," he concluded. Beepaw's eyes sparkled.

"I thought that Clan leaders weren't afraid of anything." He said.

"Well this one is," Brackenstar mewed, laughing. Beepaw gave an maniacal laugh.

"Then maybe you shouldn't be the leader," he said mischievously. Brackenstar swiped at him playfully. He darted out of Brackenstar's reach.

"Go catch up, you little traitor," Brackenstar chuckled. He sat down at Beepaw ran ahead.

"Bye, Beepaw! Tell me about it when you get back!" He called. The ginger tabby apprentice waved his tail at him.

I wish Beepaw were my son. I know he wishes I was his father. He knows nothing about Darkmist. I know I promised his mother that I would never tell him just before he died, but I wish I could. Ashflower was wonderful cat. We were going to be mates before Darkmist came along. I've learned to love Dawnmist, his sister, but nobody could ever replace Ashflower.

She instantly fell in love with the handsome tom. I know she still had a spot for me in heart alongside him, but I'll have to admit, he was better looking than me. I'm honestly dreading my visit tonight.

Brackenstar's thoughts were all over the place. It was sundown before Brackenstar realized. He jumped to his paws and went on his way, leaving the camp deserted. He traveled along the scent line at the edge of Clan territory for a while. Finally, he crossed the border into unfamiliar land. He sniffed the air for scents of predators and prey.
Plenty of mice scents. No fox. No badger. Coast clear. Go time!

Brackenstar headed towards a clump of rocks in the distance. If he was lucky, he would reach the Circle of Truth by moonhigh. The Advisors would be upset. As he drew closer, he could make the shapes of two cats standing in front of the entrance to the Circle. One small, one large. When he approached the Circle, the larger silhouette came to greet him.

"You're late, Brackenstar." The dark shape said. The small tom came to stand next to him. Brackenstar sighed. The large tom would say that even if he *was* on time. It started to rain.

"I know, I know, Darkmist." Brackenstar mewed cheerily.

"Why?" Came the cold reply. The small, orange tom tried to come up with a good answer.

"I wanted to send my Clan off to the Assembly. It doesn't happen very often you know. I remember my first Assembly. I was so excited..." He trailed off at the look on Darkmist's face.

"I'm sure it was lovely," he said, his face blank, "Let's go. The other leaders are already here. You're embarrassing me and my apprentice, Specklepaw." He glanced at the small tom beside him. Brackenstar looked at him.

"Ah, Specklepaw. It's wonderful to meet you." The spotted apprentice turned to face him.

"I can't say I can return the favor, because that would be a lie. You know we can't lie in the Circle of Truth." The small tom said. His face looked like it had been carved from rock. Brackenstar felt uneasy.

"Darkmist has told you about me, then?" He mewed, his voice taut. Specklepaw gave a sharp nod. Brackenstar looked away from the solemn apprentice as they entered the Circle of Truth. A large golden colored tom stood up as they came in.

"Greetings, Brackenstar," he mewed, his voice friendly. "My name is Eaglefall. I am the Advisor for ThunderClan." Brackenstar said hello and made a mental note about the large golden tabby. Then all the Clan leaders, Advisors, and their apprentices sat down together. Eaglefall cleared his throat.

"Let's begin," he said quietly. There was something strange about how much authority that soft voice had. Brackenstar told himself that he should be careful around the golden tom. He did not want to be on Eaglefall's bad side. The gathered cats immediately grew silent as he spoke.

"It is time to hear the history of the Advisory. Mapletuft, will you

start?" The dark ginger she-cat whom he pointed out dipped her head to him. It was pouring outside of the Circle.

"Long ago when Firestar's kits' kits' kin were the oldest cats in ThunderClan—" She was interrupted by a snort of contempt. "Yes, Darkmist? Do you have something to say?" The small, ginger Advisor growled.

"Why ThunderClan?" He wailed like a kit. Mapletuft glared at him. Then she continued.

"That's how history went. Now, one queen, named Willowsong, had four kits. The eldest kit was always muttering to himself and reading the patterns of the stars. His name was Nightkit. When he was six moons old, he was apprenticed to the medicine cat. One night, she found Nightpaw staring the stars outside of the den. She knew that he was meant for something different, something new.

"Willowsong asked the medicine cat to consult StarClan about him. She talked our starry ancestors, but they had no clear answer for her. Instead, they gave her a prophecy:

'There will one, dark as night,
Who seeks something greater,
The power to read the stars,
The power to shake the ground,
The power to uncover the lies,
The power to advise.'

"When the medicine cat told her about it, she was unsatisfied with that answer. She gave up hope in StarClan and tried to plan a future for her eldest son on her own. She appointed him the first Advisor ever. His name was Nightwhisper. He advised Owlstar and told him how to do things when he needed help. Nightwhisper was given the powers to read the stars, shake the ground, uncover the lies, and advise. StarClan's prophecy came true after all."

Yowls arose at her last words. Mapletuft dipped her head again. Darkmist stood up.

"And so the Advisory began." Cheers erupted again. Now Hickoryshine, ShadowClan's Advisor, stood up as Darkmist sat back down.

"Rosepatch, will you share how the Advisory operates?" A cream colored she-cat with a red splotch on her cheek stood next to her.

"Of course," she said, "All cats should know how the Advisory works. Nightwhisper did as StarClan bid him. Each Clan was given an Advisor. Each Advisor took an apprentice from their Clan. Every queen gave up their eldest kit to the newly formed Advisory, and so it goes on.

"Unless you are an only kit or a second or third litter, the eldest kit from your litter was given to the Advisory. Let us recite the names of the current Advisors and their littermates." Rosepatch nodded to Darkmist. He waved his tail at her before he began.

"ThunderClan." He nodded at Lightstar. "Eaglefall, your brother was Birchclaw. He was killed in battle. You were chosen to breed. You chose Pinefrost as the mother. Her eldest kit will be given to the Advisory when it reaches eight moons. You are the guardian to Splashkit, Dewkit, and Cloudkit." Eaglefall dipped his head to Darkmist as he finished.

"Thank you, Darkmist. Now, RiverClan. Mapletuft, you were the eldest in a litter of four. Littlekit and Juniperkit did not make it, but Sandtail is now mother to three healthy she-cats. They are the daughters of Cranestar. You were not chosen to breed." Mapletuft flicked her tail at Eaglefall. Everyone cheered.

"Thank you Eaglefall. ShadowClan. Hickoryshine, your brother was Swiftstar. He is alive and well. You were not chosen to breed." Hickoryshine gave a sharp nod.

"Thank you, Mapletuft. WindClan. Rosepatch, your sisters both died of bloodcough, an ancient sickness. You were not chosen to breed." Rosepatch twitched her ear.

"Thank you, Hickoryshine. Now for SkyClan. Darkmist, your sister

was Dawnmist. She is expecting Brackenstar's kits." She paused as everyone cheered again. She continued. "You were chosen to breed. Ashflower was the mother, but she died. Your rights as guardian of her only kit were revoked by StarClan. They are yet to choose a new guardian for Beepaw." Darkmist looked startled at Rosepatch's announcement, but he stood up anyway.

"Thank you, Rosepatch. Now we shall remember the past guardians. For ThunderClan, Rocksplitter. For RiverClan, Robinsong. For ShadowClan, Doethistle. For WindClan, Spiderbite. For SkyClan, also Rocksplitter."

Brackenstar exchanged a glance with Lightstar. *Our brother!* He thought happily. *The Advisor for* two *Clans!* Darkmist turned to look at him. Eaglefall continued to address the crowd as Darkmist made his way over to Brackenstar. He hissed.

"How dare you!" He said quietly, but with an edge to his voice. Brackenstar looked at him, bewildered.

"What?" He asked, "What are you meowing about?" Darkmist hissed again. The meeting was at a close. It was almost dawn.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about!" Brackenstar shook his head again, clearly confused. He needed to get back to his Clan. They were the only cats in the Circle besides Specklepaw. Everyone else had already left.

"You tricked Rosepatch! I know you want revenge against me. You're trying to steal my son. You're trying to get rid of me! Never, never!"

He growled and launched himself at Brackenstar, claws outstretched, groping for his throat.

"He's a Lousy Father"

[image]

•Riverstorm•

Bright sunshine streamed through a crack in the roof. A raindrop splashed onto a nest nearby. More rain pitter-pattered down. Groans of despair rose as everyone started to get wet. Someone yowled as someone else stepped on her tail. "Watch where your stepping," she hissed. Every cat was cranky because of the weather. It had been raining straight for almost a quarter moon. Last night had been the first break since then.

A dark gray tom stood up. He shook each paw in turn and then arched his back. He walked to the entrance of the den. The she-cat that had yowled came and sat next to him. "Lovely morning," he joked. She growled and flicked her tail at him. He purred.

She turned to look at him with her soft, amber eyes. They were deep pools of something he couldn't quite place. She leaned her head on his shoulder. He looked down at her. "If only this rain would stop." She licked his ear and purred.

"Maybe soon," she mewed, "It's letting up a little this morning." He gazed up at the sky. The pale, gray dawn was slowly growing brighter as time passed by.

"Let all cats old enough to swim the Great Current gather beneath the Tall Rushes for a Clan meeting!" Cranestar's voice rang out amidst the quiet dawn. The two gray cats weaved their way through the crowd to a nice shady spot beneath the Tall Rushes. Cranestar cleared his throat.

"Flintpaw, Blackpaw, come here please." A light grey tom and a black tom picked their way to where Cranestar was sitting on a boulder. Cranestar looked at the rising sun for a moment before

speaking.

"I, Cranestar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I commend them to you in their turn. Oneleg, Lilyleaf? Are they ready to become warriors?"

The two cats mentioned nodded their heads. Cranestar continued.

"Flintpaw, Blackpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend your Clanmates and those in need, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do."

"I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Flintpaw, from the moment forward, you shall be known as Flintheart. StarClan honors your courage and skill. Blackpaw, from this moment forward, you shall be known as Blackfur. StarClan honors your bravery and determination. We welcome you as full members of RiverClan."

The newly named warriors received cheers and congratulations as they made their way back to the back of the crowd. Everyone started to get up and leave. Cranestar lashed his tail.

"Wait!" He commanded. "Sit down. All of you." The gathered cats sat down in a hurry.

"At this time, it is my duty as leader of RiverClan, to check in with all members of the Clan. For those of you too young to remember the last analysis, it is the custom, the night after the Assembly, to assess how the Clan is doing. Birdtail, Thrushpaw, and I will be examining you all. Please wait patiently until it's your turn."

Cranestar leaped down from the boulder in the Tall Rushes. He headed toward the two gray cats in the shade. He called to them. The dark gray tom murmured in the silver she-cat's ear.

"I bet he's going to ask you if you're expecting kits yet." She laughed.

"He'd better not," she said. He purred.

"Or he'll ask you if you have your eye on any toms." She looked at her paws, suddenly shy. She looked up at him.

"Um, actually," she started. "Riverstorm, I-" Cranestar reached them.

"Sorrelstream, we'll start with you. Are you expecting kits?" He asked. Riverstorm gave Sorrelstream an amused glance. She purred.

"No, Cranestar." She mewed, her whiskers twitching.

"Are you sick, fatigued, nauseous, having unusual mood swings, or anything of that sort?" Sorrelstream gave an exasperated sigh. She looked at her father.

"No, Cranestar," she said to him. He paused a moment.

"Any other concerns?" He queried. Sorrelstream shook her head. Cranestar turned to look at Riverstorm.

"Let's go somewhere private, shall we?" Riverstorm just nodded, feeling confused. As soon as they were out of earshot, Cranestar turned to him.

"Does she have her eye on anyone?" He asked.

"We were just joking about how you were going to ask her that, but instead you ask me? Why don't you ask your daughter yourself?" Riverstorm felt anger boiling up on Sorrelstream's behalf. Cranestar had no right to go probing in her business by asking him. He could ask her himself! Cranestar looked slightly embarrassed.

"Er—well, I thought since you two have been hanging out so much lately, you might know..." He trailed off as Riverstorm growled.

"She's your *daughter,* for StarClan's sake. You can ask her yourself!" He flexed his claws. Cranestar cleared his throat.

"Of course," he said, "I'll go talk to her myself, on one condition." Riverstorm tilted his head.

"Yes?"

"Your analysis."

Riverstorm sighed.

"Of course," he said, "Go ahead."

"Are you sick, fatigued, nauseous, having unusual mood swings, or anything of that sort?"

Riverstorm shook his head.

"Do you have any other concerns?"

He shook his head again.

"Questions? Comments?"

Riverstorm started to shake his head, but he stopped himself.

"Actually, I do have a question. Why?" Cranestar stared at him.

"Well, I do the examinations so that I can know my Clan is doing well..."

"Not that. Why did you feel that it was okay to ask me what you did ask?"

Cranestar looked uneasy.

"Do want part of the truth or the whole truth?" He asked.

"Preferably the whole truth," Riverstorm said as sweetly as possible. Cranestar sighed. He looked to where Sorrelstream was waiting for

them. He sighed again.

"Sorrelstream and I have never gotten along very well. Even when she was a kit, we fought all the time. The Clan knew, so I vowed to not interact with her as much as possible. I kept my distance, and she kept hers. This was my first time talking to her in over a moon." He glanced away. Riverstorm looked him in the eye.

"Thank you for sharing," he said. "I want to help you guys as much as possible."

Cranestar dipped his head.

"Thank you, Riverstorm. Thank you." He said, obviously faking his gratitude.

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After his talk with Cranestar, Riverstorm had gone back to Sorrelstream. They went to take a nap in the warrior's den. As they settled down, Sorrelstream turned to him.

"Riverstorm, I-"

"Riverstorm!" Riverstorm glanced at Sorrelstream apologetically.

"I'll be right back," he said. He walked out of the den. Cranestar was standing there.

He groaned.

"Cranestar, if this is about what happened earlier," he started, feeling anger rise up. Cranestar flicked his tail.

"Let's go hunting, shall we?" Riverstorm glanced toward where Sorrelstream was lying. He looked back at Cranestar's cold gaze.

"I—"

Cranestar purred at him.

"Let's go, then!" He said. He headed toward the reeds at the camp entrance. The dark grey tom looked guiltily at the den behind. He told Sorrelstream he was sorry in his head. He ducked under the reeds after the orange-and-white tabby tom. Cranestar was waiting for him a few tail-lengths ahead. They headed toward the stream closest to the camp. As they drew nearer to the stream, the elder tom turned to him.

"How dare you question my authority!" He hissed. "Tornclaw saw how you talked to me. He told his friends all about it. Now they'll think no cat respects me." Riverstorm saw his claws slide out. He took a step back.

"I-I'm s-sorry, Cranestar," he stuttered, "I didn't r-realize how it w-would affect you." Cranestar lashed his tail. He crept forward like he was stalking prey. The younger warrior apologized again. Cranestar just hissed.

"You have one more chance," he growled, "Then come the consequences." He sat at the edge of the stream. He waited a moment before flashing out his paw to catch a minnow. It flopped on the ground beside him. He bit down and the small fish lay still.

"That will be you," he said ominously. "Now run back to camp like a good little warrior does." Riverstorm hissed, but he ran liked the tabby suggested. He could feel the elder tom's green gaze boring into his pelt. When he reached the camp, he rushed toward Sorrelstream's nest in the warrior's den. She peeked at him through half-closed eyes.

"You took your time," she mewed coolly. Riverstorm looked at his paws in embarrassment.

"It was your father," he mewed. She raised her head curiously. He told what had happened in the camp and by the stream. The dark tom shuddered as he thought of the lifeless minnow, being pierced by Cranestar's razor sharp claws. He curled up next to the silver she-cat. He swiped his tongue over her rumpled fur, smoothing it down. Sorrelstream looked at him. She purred. She took a deep breath.

"Riverstorm, there's been something I want to tell you." He pricked his ears.

"Go on," he mewed.

"Well, I-I." She stopped.

"I like you." She blurted. He blinked.

"I like you too," he said, "You're my best friend. Not that I have any other friends."

Sorrelstream shook her head.

"I like you like a *lot*." She said. She looked at her paws.

Oh. *Oh. Like* like. He didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I shouldn't have-" He stopped her, then thought for a moment.

"Don't be sorry." He mewed, "I'm sorry, but I don't feel that way either." She sighed.

"Oh," she mewed, "That's okay. It's really okay." She buried her head in his fur. He rubbed her cheek.

"I love you too," he said, "Just as a friend." He fell asleep with his chin resting on her back.

"Why am I Different?"

[image]

•Sunpaw•

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!" Lightstar's strong, deep mew rang out. Sunkit smoothed his fur down quickly. He and Moonkit practically ran outside the nursery.

"Sunkit, Moonkit, come here." The two young cats bounded forward to where Lightstar was perched. Sunkit danced on his paws excitedly.

"You two have reached the age of six moons. It is time for you to become apprentices. Moonkit, from this moment, and until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Moonpaw. Cheetahstride, my eldest son mentored you, and you have shown promise as a great warrior. I hope you will pass on your fighting skills to Moonpaw.

"Briarpool, you are ready for your first apprentice. I know you will make an excellent mentor for young Sunpaw."

Sunpaw rushed forward to touches noses with his gray-and-white tortoiseshell mentor. He saw a large yellow tom with black spots do the same with Moonpaw.

"Moonpaw! Sunpaw! Moonpaw! Sunpaw!" The Clan cheered. Everyone crowded around to congratulate them. Sunpaw turned to look up at Briarpool.

"What do we do now?" He asked, hoping to start hunting right away. She glanced down at him.

"I'm going to show you around our territory." Sunpaw's heart sank, as he imagined every other apprentice's heart would. Briarpool headed toward the camp entrance. He raced after her, suddenly feeling excited at the thought of going outside of the camp for the first time. He pushed through the brambles after his mentor. The small golden apprentice heard pawsteps behind them. He turned around to see Moonpaw and his mentor standing there. Cheetahstride looked at Sunpaw.

"I thought that it might be a good idea for you and your brother to explore the territory together." He mewed. Sunpaw took his first glimpse of ThunderClan's woods. He had never known the world was this big. He caught up with Briarpool just as she stopped by a big tree.
"This is the Sky Oak," she said, not looking away from its vast branches. "The sandy clearing beneath it is where the apprentices battle train." Just then Russetbreeze and Icewing, along with their apprentices, Sandypaw and Darkpaw, arrived in the clearing. Russetbreeze turned to Briarpool.
"Ah, sister. I thought that Sandypaw and Darkpaw might train together in the clearing. Would it be okay if Sunpaw watched us? Moonpaw too, of course." He said, nodding his head to the small white apprentice. Sunpaw's tortoiseshell mentor nodded her approval. Sunpaw dashed over to the edge of the clearing. Sandypaw turned to greet him.

"Hi, Sunpaw!" The pale brown she-cat mewed. Darkpaw ran circles around him.
"Are you coming to train with us? How many moves do you know? Are you excited to be an apprentice? Is Briarpool nice? Isn't this clearing so cool? Isn't the forest so cool? Aren't the trees so pretty?" The black apprentice's questions went on and on. Sandypaw growled at her. Sunpaw stopped listening.

A golden she-cat.
A dark brown tom.
The she-cat purrs. She rushes to greet the tom. There are stars in her pelt. The tom rubs his cheek against her muzzle. Where have you been? *The she-cat says,* You took your time. *He shuffles his paws, clearly embarrassed.*
I-I, well- *he stutters. She nudges him.*
I'm just kidding, *she says,* Although it has been hard waiting all these moons. Over half a dozen leaf-bares have gone by since I last talked to you. I remember those badger's fangs; right up against my face. I don't blame you for leaving me behind. I thought I was dead too.
The tom gives a slight laugh, trying to lighten the mood. He looks at her regretfully. I wish I could have seen you in those moments before you died. *He sighs.* I missed you so much. Growing old in the elder's den did me no good. It would have been better with you by my

side.

I know, *she says,* It wasn't my choice to die, you know. It was a simple accident. Smallclaw never meant to kill me.

A flame-colored tom appeared by her side. He has brilliant green eyes. The brown tom gasps. Foxcatcher? My dear friend? I had no idea that you had passed. I thought you simply weren't at the last Gathering. I'm so sorry.

The orange tom gives a mrow *of laughter. He shakes his head.* My name is Firestar, *he says*, But Foxcatcher is here too.

Foxcatcher! *The brown tom rushes to another orange cat that appeared. They greet each other. The she-cat walks up to him as well.*

It's been awhile, aye, brother? *She bats him playfully. He swipes back.* I had no idea you were in StarClan, you great furball. *She says to him. He purrs. Firestar turns to them.*

I love when families and friends reunite, *he says, to no one in particular. A ginger she-cat pads up to him.*

Let's let them be, *she mews. She turns and walks away, Firestar at her heels.*

You're fading. *He turns to look at her.* You know what that means, right? *She sighs.*

Less cats are remembering me these days. *She lays on the ground. He curls up next to her.*

I won't let you fade. Never. As long as cats remember me, you won't fade away.

A tom who looks almost exactly like Firestar comes up behind them.

I'm going to fade soon, *he mews. Firestar jerks his head up.*

Who are you? *He asks. The orange tom laughs.*

Ask Tallstar. *He sits down a few tail-lengths away. Just then, a lithe black-and-white tom runs up.*

Jake! I never knew you were so fast! *He exclaims. He stops when he sees Firestar.* I see you two have met. *Jake chuckles.*

I have a feeling I know exactly who this young tom is. *Tallstar laughs with him.*

Firestar, do you know who this is? *The flame-colored tom shakes his head.*

No, Tallstar, *he answers politely. He clearly respects the black-and-white leader. The elder tom's eyes sparkle.*

Firestar, from the moment I saw you, I knew who you were. *Firestar looks at him, confused.*

Who am I, then? *He queries. Jake and Tallstar exchange a glance.*

I knew from the second I laid my eyes on you, you were Jake's son. You are the spitting image of your father. *He twitches his whiskers, clearly amused. Firestar's mouth drops open in shock. The ginger she-cat stares back and forth between Tallstar, Jake, and Firestar.*

But-eh-huh? *Firestar sputters. His fur is bristling in shock.* How are you in StarClan? *He asks. Jake comes a little closer to them. The she-cat growls. He sits down.*

Tallstar, *he mews simply.* Tallstar made me believe. I could have died and gone where kittypets go, but Tallstar made me believe. He was Talltail at the time, of course. *Tallstar licks his chest fur in embarrassment.*

That wasn't the reason Jake and I came, though. *Firestar flicks his ear.*

Oh? *He tilts his head toward Tallstar to go on.*

I wanted to discuss the new arrivals in StarClan. *The black-and-white tom licks his paw casually.*

Oh, Foxcatcher? *Firestar sits down to wash the ginger she-cat's pelt. She purrs with contentment. Tallstar shakes his head.*

The other two. Their love was forbidden, you know. *Firestar stops licking at Tallstar's words.*

The warrior code has changed, *he points out.*

They chose to stay in separate Clans, *the she-cat retorts. Firestar frowns.*

You're siding with Tallstar, Sandstorm? A kittypet joining a Clan was forbidden, but here you are, mates with him. *He gives her an injured expression. She growls.*

Don't forget that I hated you at first. Dustpelt and I taunted you. We chanted 'once a kittypet, always a kittypet.' I didn't like you until I became a warrior. But of course, Bluestar insisted that you join ThunderClan. *Sandstorm purrs. He laughs, his memories taking him back to that time, many, many moons ago. Tallstar clears his throat.*

Should they be allowed to stay in StarClan? *He queries. Jake tilts his head thoughtfully.*

Yes! *Firestar answers immediately.*

Perhaps Tallstar is right this time, Firestar. They broke the warrior code. *A she-cat's voice comes from the shadows. It is a gruff sort of voice. A blue-grey she-cat steps out. Firestar kneads his claws on the grass. Night is falling.*

But Bluestar- *he protests. She flicks her tail for him to be quiet.*

It was forbidden, Firestar. *Her tone is firm now, but not unfriendly. The flame-colored tom growls.*

I broke the warrior code, Bluestar. You bringing me to ThunderClan was a violation. *He finishes washing Sandstorm's pelt.*

You broke it many times, my dear friend. *Bluestar says coolly. He laughs.*

Besides, Leafpool, Squirrelflight, and Crowfeather are in StarClan. *He points out.* That was *before* the warrior code changed. *Bluestar sighs. She sits down next to Tallstar and Jake.*

He has a point, Tallstar. Jake is here too. *Tallstar nods slowly.*

What do you think, Jake? *The orange tom licks his paw and swipes it over his ears.*

Like Bluestar says, I'm here and I was a kittypet my whole life. Firestar is here too. *He looks in the distance wistfully, then looks back at Firestar.* I remember when you were just a kit. Your name was Rusty, if I remember correctly. I knew that you would grow up to be something greater. *Firestar's eyes grow round, as if Jake told him something horrible had happened. He licks his chest fur hurriedly.*

I remember that too, though I don't like to. I prefer to think of my warrior days. *Tallstar flicks his tail.*

Jake? *He asks.* What do you think? Should they be allowed here? *He sits down to wash his pelt. It's dark now, and they can hardly see their paws in front of them. Jake settles down for the night.*

I say they stay, *he says sleepily. Only a few moments later, he is sound asleep. Tallstar nods.*

You all have spoken. They will stay.

What about ShadowClan, SkyClan, and RiverClan? *Bluestar asks. Puzzled, Tallstar tilts his head.* Shouldn't the other three Clans have a say? One of them is from ShadowClan, anyway. *Tallstar nods.*

I'll go get Blackstar, Crookedstar, and Leafstar. *He says, already a few tail-lengths away from them. Bluestar nods her approval. Soon the lithe tom is back with three other cats; two toms and a she-cat. The first tom is white with four black paws. He's massive, with a stone-faced, but not unfriendly expression.*

The second tom is a ginger tabby. He has a more inviting look as his gaze sweeps over the gathered leaders. The third cat, the she-cat is also ginger. She seems to be the most friendly out of all of them. She has a slight prance to her step, like she is a young apprentice going on a patrol.

Why did you call us here, Tallstar? *The large, white tom inquires. He dips his head the black-and-white tom.*

I need you, Crookedstar, and Leafstar to make a decision about the new arrivals here. *He proceeds to explain about the brown tom and golden she-cat.* Should they be allowed to stay? *He asks as he finishes telling the story.*

I think that they should stay, *says the ginger she-cat. The ginger tabby nods his agreement.*

I agree with Leafstar, *he mews. The white tom narrows his eyes.*

I have the final say, *he points out,* And I think that they shouldn't be here. It was forbidden.

Blackstar, we've all broken the warrior code at some point. *Firestar counters. Blackstar growls.*

Some more than others, *he says, obviously annoyed at being here.*

Please, Blackstar. *He protests, trying to get the tom to reconsider.*

One of them is in *my* Clan! *Blackstar snarls.*

The other one is in my Clan. It makes no difference whose Clan they're in. *Firestar is on his paws now.*

Some of us don't want a bad reputation for our Clan. We all know ThunderClan lets kittypets and loners into their Clan. *The big tom lashes his tail.*

Look who has a former kittypet in their Clan right now. *Firestar taunts.*

Look who *is* a kittypet, *Blackstar hisses.*

How dare you! I am a Clan cat through and through! *Firestar yowls.*

Your father, *he spits,* is a *kittypet. Jake gives a hurt expression. The other cats are looking on in shock.*

He's more of a warrior than you'll ever be! *Firestar crouches down like he is going to leap on the massive, white tom.*

Enough! *Blackstar roars. Suddenly, everything falls dark. Everything is gone.*

"Poor Guy"

[image]

•Brackenstar•

Brackenstar woke, dazed and bruised, in a den smelling of herbs. "Sedgefur? Bloomshade?" He croaked. A pale brown she-cat appeared above him.

"My name is Willowleaf. I'm ThunderClan's medicine cat. This is Barkpaw." She said, nodding to a brown tabby tom next to her. He mewed his hello. Brackenstar blinked hazily.

"What am I doing here?" He asked. Just then, a white tom ducked into the medicine den. He stopped beside Brackenstar's nest. The small, orange tom dipped his head.

"Greetings, Lightstar. What am I doing here?" He repeated weakly. Lightstar shooed the medicine cats away. Willowleaf growled, but obeyed her Clan leader. He leaned down and began to groom Brackenstar's pelt.

"How are you, brother?" He queried, purring. Lightstar curled up next to Brackenstar. Brackenstar managed to give a faint purr.

"As well as I can be, considering that I was attacked by an Advisor." He reached out to give Lightstar's fur a few licks. Lightstar laughed. "That's more like the littermate I used to talk to at Gatherings." He shook his head. "I miss those days, when we were so carefree." Brackenstar nodded in total agreement with his brother. Lightstar cleared his throat.

"Now, brother, to answer your question. I brought you here last night because I couldn't bear to leave you. I saw how battered and torn you were, so I asked Eaglefall if I could take you home." Brackenstar smiled.

"Not *my* home," he mewed. "Besides, you had better be careful calling me 'brother.'" Lightstar washed his forepaw.

"You're right. We don't want our secret to get out." He rubbed his muzzle over Brackenstar's back.

"Squirrel-chaser with fish-breath," Brackenstar whispered. Lightstar swiped a paw at him, his claws sheathed.

"Fish-faced tree-climber." He retorted, his voice hushed. They both fell over, purring. Brackenstar laid back down in his nest hurriedly when he saw Willowleaf arrive at the mouth of the den.
"We have a visitor, Lightstar." He murmured. Lightstar sat up and turned around like he hadn't acted like a kit just a few moments earlier.
"Just a few more minutes, Willowleaf." He said. She dipped her head and padded away. "Do you know anything more?" He hissed as soon as the medicine cat was out of earshot.

"No," he mewed, "not since the Gathering when we were apprentices." Lightstar growled in frustration.

"Me, either." He stated. Brackenstar sighed.

"I can't imagine Stoneclaw taking a mate from another Clan. Ashclaw, Stormheart, and Dewkit are the only other gray cats in the Clan. Ashclaw and Dewkit are younger than us, so they can't be our father. Besides, Dewkit is a she-cat." The white tom tilted his head thoughtfully. He snorted. "Obviously. That means it's either Stormheart or Stoneclaw." Brackenstar nodded.

"Stoneclaw's too loyal, and Stormheart has a mate." He observed.

"We could confront one of them." Lightstar offered.

"What if we talk to the wrong one? Then what-" The orange tom broke off as he spotted a golden colored apprentice outside the den. He nodded for him to come in. The small tom stepped gingerly inside.
"I was sent to talk to Willowleaf, but apparently she isn't here." He turned around to leave the den. Lightstar called to him. The young apprentice whipped around, as though startled to be addressed by his leader.
"Did you hear us talking?" Lightstar asked. The apprentice hesitated before shaking his head.
"Nothing important," he mewed. Lightstar raised his head quizzically.
"So you did hear something, then?" He pressed. The golden tom nodded guiltily. "What did you hear?" The white tom demanded.
"I arrived when you said 'so they can't be our father.'" *StarClan, no!* Brackenstar gave a look of horror. Lightstar glanced at the apprentice disapprovingly.
"Sunpaw, I have a feeling that you are going to be picking the elders' ticks off for a while." He sighed, suddenly looking weary.
"So, how much do you know?" The apprentice—Sunpaw—looked at

his paws, clearly embarrassed.

"Well, you and Brackenstar are brothers," he began. Brackenstar sighed. Sunpaw knew enough. Too much, in fact. Lightstar beckoned for the young tom to go on. "And your father is ThunderClan. You think he's either Stormheart or Stoneclaw. That's all I heard." Lightstar shook his head in dismay.

"You might as well know the whole truth," he said. Brackenstar nodded in agreement.

"We don't want you to live with half the story your life. But you have to swear that you will never tell anyone, got it?" Sunpaw's eyes were round. He nodded solemnly at the small, orange tom's words.

"Brackenstar, our brother, Rockkit, and I were born many moons ago, on the night of the full moon." Brackenstar snorted at his brother's words.

"We're not that old," He interrupted. Lightstar ignored him.

"We had no idea who our parents were. I was given to ThunderClan, and Brackenstar was gifted to SkyClan. Rockkit was taken to the Advisory. He became the Advisor for ThunderClan and SkyClan. His name was Rocksplitter. He died of greencough."

"Oh," came the soft voice of Sunpaw, "I'm so sorry." Brackenstar dipped his head.

"Thank you," he meowed.

"When Brackenstar and I were apprentices, we overheard the RiverClan medicine cat and a ThunderClan tom talking. Brackenstar, then Brackenpaw, saw the RiverClan she-cat had a brown tip to her tail, like him." Brackenstar held out his tail for Sunpaw to see.

"So, we are the sons of either Stoneclaw or Stormheart, and whatever her name is." Lightstar concluded.

"Birdtail," Brackenstar mewed drily. Sunpaw blinked.

"Oh," he said again. "Well, I'll just wait here for Willowleaf then." Lightstar got up to leave.

"I expect I won't see you until the next Gathering then, aye?" Brackenstar nodded.

"I'll see you then," he responded. Willowleaf walked in as Lightstar padded out.

"I heard Sunpaw needed to talk to me." She said seriously. "What is it?" Sunpaw shrank into the corner by Brackenstar's nest. He purred and comforted the young apprentice.

"Briarpool told me to come here because of a dream I had." Brackenstar sat back to listen to the golden tom's story. Willowleaf nodded for him to tell his story. "It wasn't exactly a dream, more like a vision. There were two cats—a golden she-cat and a dark brown tom. They seemed like they were old friends, or I think mates. Then Firestar showed up with my father behind him."
"Was this StarClan?" Willowleaf asked. Sunpaw nodded.
"Foxcatcher and the two cats were chatting when a ginger she-cat came up to Firestar. Sandstorm, I think her name was. They walked away, and then an orange tom walked up to them.
"He introduced himself as Jake, the father of Firestar. Then Tallstar and Bluestar were there. Tallstar went and fetched Crookedstar, Leafstar, and Blackstar. Then Blackstar had a big argument with Firestar. It all happened so fast, so I forget the details." He licked his chest fur, embarrassed. Willowleaf seemed intrigued now. Brackenstar thought a moment.
"Has this happened before?" He asked. Sunpaw nodded.
"Once before, the day my mother died."
"Do you know who the she-cat and tom were?" Willowleaf queried.
"I don't know who the tom was, but the she-cat was Foxcatcher's sister." She exchanged a glance with Brackenstar.
"We had better consult Lightstar about this." Brackenstar nodded in agreement. *I can't believe that this young apprentice saw Lightstar's former mate in his vision!* He thought.

"Lightstar!" He called, "Come back to the medicine den!" A few moments later the broad-shouldered tom appeared by his side.

"What do you need?" He asked.

"Sunpaw had a vision concerning Honeydew." Lightstar's eyes grew wide at the SkyClan leader's words.

"Honeydew, as in *my* Honeydew? Well not mine..." He said, his voice trailing away.

"I'm sure that Vinestripes regrets his decision," Brackenstar mewed fiercely. Lightstar shook his head sadly.

"I know that he has never regretted loving her, even though he took her from me. Knowing he apologized doesn't ease the pain of living without her. Every beat of my heart is a moment without my dear Honeydew." Brackenstar, Willowleaf, and Sunpaw dipped their heads respectively as he went on. "StarClan even took all four of our kits from me. Why, oh, why?" He wailed.

"What were their names?" Sunpaw asked quietly. Lightstar

turned to look at him.

"Bullkit, Clearpaw, Nettlewhisker, and Lakestar." Sunpaw's eyes widened.

"I've heard about Lakestar! I had no idea that he was your son." The young tom mewed incredulously. Lightstar nodded.

"Now, about your vision. Tell me all about it." Sunpaw proceeded to repeat what he had told Brackenstar and Willowleaf. Brackenstar itched to get out of the nest he was lying in. He twitched several times before Willowleaf turned to him irritably.

"Would you stop moving, for StarClan's sake!" She huffed, before turning back to Sunpaw and Lightstar. "To me it sounds like you are cut out to be a medicine cat." She said when Sunpaw finished relaying his story for the ThunderClan leader. Willowleaf was the only cat there who seemed not to notice Sunpaw's look of horror.

"But-but-I..." He spluttered. "I want to be a warrior!"

"You'll have to accept your destiny sooner rather than later." She snapped. "I'll formally take you to meet StarClan at the half-moon." Brackenstar could practically feel Sunpaw's dismay like a thick pelt covering the medicine den. He noticed Lightstar shooting sympathetic glances at the young apprentice. He had a feeling that Sunpaw was not going to have fun training under this prickly lump of fur.

"How will he train if Barkpaw isn't a full medicine cat yet?" Lightstar asked, voicing Brackenstar's thoughts.

"I suppose Barkpaw is going to get his name earlier than expected, then." The grumpy she-cat growled. "Just don't tell him, please." Lightstar looked concerned.

"Is Barkpaw ready for that?" He inquired. Brackenstar could sense Sunpaw's resentment at training with Willowleaf.

"At least Barkpaw is friendly enough," he whispered in Sunpaw's ear. The golden tom nodded.

"Yes." Came the medicine cat's short reply. Lightstar sighed.

"If this is what StarClan wishes, then let it be so. Willowleaf, you have my permission to train Sunpaw as a medicine cat. I will announce it at dawn."

"Please don't tell any cat about my visions." Sunpaw pleaded.

"I won't," mewed Lightstar, "but you're still going to train to heal your Clanmates instead of fight for them." Brackenstar felt frustration on Sunpaw's behalf over his brother's unfair decision.

"Who Put Mouse Bile in His Prey?"

[image]

•Riverstorm•

The rain had finally let up. Riverstorm was glad that he could eat prey that hadn't sat in a puddle of rain water since it had been caught. Being with Sorrelstream had been a little awkward since she had told him about her crush on him. He had been purposefully avoiding Cranestar. The older tom seemed to have lost his mind since his threat to kill Riverstorm.
He headed out of camp to do some fishing by himself. He found himself walking along the stream where he and Cranestar had fought. He knew that Cranestar hadn't made a move to talk to his daughter. As Riverstorm sat down to fish, memories came flooding back.

"Come on, River! Let's see you try to catch a fish!" River raced alongside his littermates, relishing the warm breeze. He was surprised that Pepper, his mother, was allowing them to go near the river after it had thawed. He could see the water flowing over the banks on either side. It was a clear, sparkling blue.
River dashed toward the edge. His brother, Lucky, followed close behind him. River could see Tad and Panther, his other siblings, splashing in the water nearby. Confident, he sat down at the edge to see if he could catch a fish. After a minute of waiting, he shot out his paw to scoop up a small minnow. It lay wriggling on the bank for a moment before going still. He felt a flash of pride. My first fish! *He thought.*
He picked it up in his mouth and brought it over to where Pepper was lying. He dropped it in front of her. "Look, mama. Look what I caught!" He exclaimed. She purred drowsily and brought the minnow nearer to her.
"Good job, River." She mewed. "I'm sure there's more where that came from." River nodded. He was happy that river-thaw was finally here.

Suddenly he heard a yowl.
"Mama! Pops! Help!" River rushed to the stream to see Lucky scrabbling to get out of the water. "Save me!" He cried. River tried to go after him, but Pepper stopped him.
"There's nothing we can do, River." She said. "The water is too high. It will take him somewhere else. This is his destiny. We cannot change it." River watched despairingly as his beloved brother was washed down the rapidly flowing brook.

Riverstorm jerked. He had been so caught up in his memories that he hadn't noticed Pantherfur walk up next to him. She looked at him. "What were you thinking about?" She asked.
"Lucky." He said simply. She leaned on his shoulder.
"Oh." She murmured. "I think about him all the time."
"Do you ever wonder what happened to Pepper and Tad?" He turned to look at his sister. She nodded.
"I wish we could have known our kin better. I love Jaystorm and Flashmask like they are actually our brothers, but it's not the same."
"I miss Chance." Riverstorm sighed. "He was a good father to me. We were so close. I wonder where he is now." Pantherfur washed his shoulder in a few brisk licks.
"I came here to talk to you about Cranestar." She said.
"Is it about how he threatened me?" Riverstorm asked drily.
"I want you to know that I don't agree with what he said to you."
"You don't agree with how he threatened me and compared me to a minnow he killed, you mean." Pantherfur ignored him.
"I want you to know that you can rely on me as the littermate you played with when you were two moons old. You can stick by me and I'll stick by your side. River, you are the best brother I could ask for." He rubbed against her, breathing in the same scent he had known since he was born.
"Well, *Panther,* you are an amazing sister. I love you so much. I'll always be there for you." They both purred and sat together for a while. Finally, Pantherfur looked up at him.
"There's something else I wanted to tell you." He glanced at her in surprise.
"Oh? What is it?" She looked down in embarrassment.
"I'm expecting kits." She blurted. He glanced at her belly. Now that he was paying attention to it, it did look slightly swollen.
"Congratulations!" He purred. "Have you told Twistedclaw, yet?"

She shook her head.
"How did you know he was the father?" She blushed.
"You two have been spending a lot of time together lately." They lay there until dusk. Side by side, the two siblings headed home.
***
Riverstorm woke up to a loud pounding. He cracked open an eye sleepily. Cranestar was standing on his boulder by the Tall Rushes. He was banging his forepaws against the edge of the rock. *Is this some new way of summoning the Clan?* Riverstorm thought. He sat up and stretched. Most of the Clan had already gathered in the clearing. He walked out and sat down by Pantherfur and Twistedclaw. Sorrelstream came and sat beside him.

"Pantherfur is stepping down from her deputy position because she is expecting kits." Cranestar announced. Twistedclaw purred loudly. Everyone gave murmurs of congratulations. Cranestar cleared his throat. "Oneleg will be the new deputy until her kits are made apprentices." Riverstorm nodded. Oneleg was a good choice. He was loyal, but he wouldn't follow Cranestar blindly. He was a senior warrior that the whole Clan would respect.

"Oneleg! Oneleg!" The Clan cheered. Suddenly a thought struck Riverstorm. *Why didn't Cranestar ask StarClan to approve his choice for the new deputy?* He wondered. He exchanged a glance with Sorrelstream. Clearly she was thinking the same thing. Cranestar glared at Riverstorm before leaping off of the boulder and vanishing into his den.
"What was that about?" Sorrelstream asked as soon as Cranestar was out of sight. Riverstorm shrugged, not wanting to reveal the lingering tension between her father and him.

"I was wondering why he didn't ask for StarClan's blessing. I think something is wrong." Sorrelstream nodded, looking concerned. "Maybe I should go and talk to him." Riverstorm glanced away.

"I think it might be best if you leave him alone for now." He mewed. Sorrelstream narrowed her eyes. "Why don't you go visit Sandtail's new litter?" He said quickly. Sorrelstream looked queasy at the thought.
"I've never gotten along well with my mother, either." He sighed.

"Do it for the kits." He said. She nodded and turned toward the nursery. Riverstorm sighed with relief as she disappeared inside. He heard the excited squeaks of the three newest daughters of

Cranestar. He padded back to his nest.

"Chance! Chance!" Pepper called anxiously. "Where are you?" River joined in calling for his father.
"Pops! Papa!" He yowled. Pepper sighed.
"It's no use, River. He's gone. Your father is a smart cat. He'll survive." River sat looking at where he had seen Chance last. His father had disappeared over the hill, trapped inside of a Twoleg monster. He padded over to where Panther and Tad lay curled up. He joined their heap. Soon he was fast asleep.

Riverstorm blinked open his eyes to see Tornclaw standing over him. "Wake up, sleepyhead. It's time for the sunhigh patrol." He groaned and stood up. He stretched each leg in turn before following Tornclaw outside of the warriors' den. Leopardwhisker, Sleekpelt, and Mistypaw were waiting near the reed barrier at the entrance to the camp. Riverstorm excused himself for a moment to go to the dirtplace. He sighed with relief when Tornclaw allowed him to go. He would catch up with the patrol later.
He headed toward the dirtplace tunnel at the rear of the camp. He picked his way across and sat down at the edge of the stream. He heard the crunch of a reed nearby. He pricked his ears and sniffed the air. *Rabbit!* He crept closer to where the source of the noise was coming from. Riverstorm saw a flash of white through the leaves of a bush.
He darted from where he had been sitting and raced after the rabbit. Suddenly two brown tabby paws shot out and caught the rabbit. A brown tabby head bent down and killed it. Riverstorm stared at the it in shock. The tabby laughed.
"My rabbit!" Riverstorm exclaimed. "That's mine!"
"Nice to meet you, too. My name's Dewspeck."
"That's my rabbit!" He repeated.
"It's actually WindClan prey."
"But you're on RiverClan territory." Dewspeck smirked.
"I'm a WindClan warrior. I caught the rabbit. Besides, RiverClan doesn't eat rabbits. *My* Clan does." Riverstorm growled. He slid out his claws.
"You're *still* in RiverClan's territory." He pointed out. Dewspeck snarled and leapt at Riverstorm. They tussled on the ground. Riverstorm forced him towards the stream. Dewspeck, unaware

what he was doing, rolled right over into the stream. Riverstorm held his paws on Dewspeck's throat and pushed him down into the water. The WindClan warrior grabbed his paws in an effort to come back up to the surface.

He gurgled and his struggles became feebler. Riverstorm lunged into the stream and hauled the dark tabby tom out. Dewspeck shook out his fur before glaring at him. "Fine." He spat. "Have your rabbit. *I'm* going to go find some better prey prey on my own territory." He picked up the rabbit in his jaws and threw on ground before stamping on it and clawing its pelt up. He finished by throwing it in the stream. "This isn't over." He hissed.

The tabby warrior snarled and ran towards the WindClan border. Riverstorm followed him to make sure that he had crossed the border. He walked slowly back to the stream to get the rabbit. The limp, sodden body was floating on the surface of the calm, rippling water. He leaned over the stream and gently picked up the ruined rabbit. Riverstorm headed back to camp, feeling much more tired than before. As he padded in Tornclaw came to greet him.

"Riverstorm! Where have you been? We waited for you but you never showed up."

"What happened to that rabbit? It looks as though it fought a battle." Sleekpelt commented. Mistypaw snickered from behind her mentor. Riverstorm rolled his eyes. He set down the rabbit.

"I'm going to talk to Cranestar." He mewed. "Keep an eye on the rabbit." Leopardwhisker nodded. He started to go into the Cranestar's den when Oneleg intercepted him.

"I've just been in there." He said. "I wouldn't go talk to him if I were you." Riverstorm glanced at him in surprise.

"Is something wrong?" He asked. Oneleg shook his head too quickly for his liking. He narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong?" He demanded. The black tom sighed.

"Cranestar is losing his mind. He's hysterical. I tried to get him to tell me what was wrong, but he just looked at me with wild eyes. He started yowling after you went out on patrol. I had to call for Birdtail and Thrushpaw to come calm him down. Birdtail had to give him some poppyseeds and thyme to get him to fall asleep." Riverstorm's eyes widened.

"Who else knows about this?" He queried.

"Just the medicine cats, you, me, and Pantherfur." He stated.

"I suggest you keep this quiet until we've found out what's going

on." Then he realized how commanding he had sounded. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you do anything." Oneleg dipped his head. "I agree with you. We should keep this to ourselves. And don't worry, I don't mind you tellin' me what to do." Riverstorm sighed with relief. The senior warrior nodded to him. "Why did you want to speak to Cranestar so urgently?" He asked. Riverstorm accounted his story about the rabbit and lead him over to where it was lying. Oneleg pawed it and sniffed it carefully.
"We'll speak to Badgerstar about this at the next Gathering." Riverstorm growled softly. The elderly WindClan leader would think up some excuse as to why Riverstorm was in the wrong and his warrior was innocent.
"You." Said a voice behind him. He whipped around to see Cranestar running towards him. "You." He repeated in that soft, cold tone. He leapt at Riverstorm and knocked him to the ground. He put his face against Riverstorm's. The dark gray warrior tried not to wince as Cranestar's rank breath rolled over his face.
"You!" Cranestar roared. "What have you done to my Clan? You undermined me. You're trying to overthrow me. I will not allow such madness in my Clan! I will kill you!"

"I Hate Herbs"

•Sunpaw•

Sunpaw sighed. He had just started training as a medicine cat apprentice.

He hated it.

Barkpaw was nice, but Willowleaf acted as though she had ants in her pelt all the time. He missed Brackenstar already. The SkyClan leader had been very kind to him. He had helped Sunpaw point out the bright side of things. He had left at sunhigh. It was almost moonhigh now. Brackenstar had been in the ThunderClan camp for just over a quarter moon. Sunpaw could tell that even though he had been fun and happy, he had been longing to go home. He must have been very happy already.

Sunpaw wasn't happy. He felt like he hadn't made any progress. He could barely tell the difference between marigold and borage. Even Barkpaw was getting frustrated with him. He was being treated horribly for not knowing the different herbs. He wished more than anything that he were in his brother's position. He wished that Lightstar hadn't consented to Willowleaf's demand. He despised the prickly she-cat more than anything.

He longed to be with Moonpaw practicing his battle moves. He couldn't even try to *hunt* without Willowleaf breathing down his neck. He was currently reciting the names of the herbs he knew under his breath. The golden apprentice knew he would never hear the end of it if he woke Willowleaf up.

"Borage. For helping queens with their milk supply. Tansy. For bellyaches. Marigold. For sore paws." He shook his head. "Tansy. For coughs. Coltsfoot. For sore paws. Marigold. For poultices on wounds." He growled softly. "Coltsfoot. For breathing. Marigold. For infections and wounds. Dock leaves. For sore pads." He grinned triumphantly. That was right. He started again.

"Borage. For *fever* and queen's milk supply. Tansy, for coughing.

Coltsfoot for breathing. Marigold for infections and wounds. Dock leaves for sore pads. Feverfew for fever." He purred softly and laid down in his nest. A rustle sounded near him.

"Sunpaw! What are you doing?" Willowleaf snapped. Sunpaw rolled his eyes in the dark and ignored her. He closed his eyes sleepily. Suddenly a yowl ripped through the air like claws in his pelt. He, Barkpaw, and Willowleaf sat bolt upright. He and Willowleaf raced out of the den while Barkpaw prepared herbs.

"What's happened?" The brown she-cat asked anxiously. Sunpaw had never heard this much emotion in her voice before.

"It's Cheetahstride. He was attacked on our patrol." The patrol leader, Foxcatcher, mewed reported worriedly. Willowleaf called for Barkpaw.

"Barkpaw! Fetch any useful herbs you can think of." She turned back to Foxcatcher. Sunpaw's eyes flicked back and forth between his mentor and his father. "Who did this?" Willowleaf asked.

"We don't know. It's dark out there, and we didn't smell a thing. We didn't even hear anyone approach." He mewed. Moonpaw was beside him.

"I heard a twig snap." His eyes shone in the pale moonlight. Foxcatcher rounded on him.

"Why didn't you tell the patrol?" He demanded. Moonpaw shrank under his fierce gaze.

"I just thought it was a piece of prey of some sort." He said sheepishly. Sunpaw came and sat beside him to comfort his brother.

"A piece of prey?" Foxcatcher screeched. "Just a piece of prey? That so called *piece of prey* almost got your mentor killed!" He lashed his tail.

"What's going here? Foxcatcher, why are you yelling at your son?" Lightstar wove between father and son. He let his tail rest on the orange tom's shoulder. Sunpaw saw his father tense visibly.

"Moonpaw mistook whoever attacked Cheetahstride as some sort of *prey*." He snarled. Sunpaw looked around anxiously until his gaze fell on the injured form of Cheetahstride. Willowleaf and Barkpaw were tending to him.

"Sunpaw." Barkpaw called softly. "Come help us. This experience might help you." Sunpaw padded over; reluctant to help, but relieved to be away from the quarreling. He sat down beside Barkpaw.

"What do you need help with?" He asked.

"Could you fetch me some marigold?" The brown tabby nodded toward the medicine den. Sunpaw nodded, but his belly tightened. *Shoot. I don't know what marigold looks like.* He thought. He raced to the cleft at the back of the den. He sniffed until he found something that he thought might be marigold. He pulled a few leaves out and brought them back to Barkpaw. His fellow apprentice shook his head.

"I'll go get it. You stay here, Sunpaw. Why don't you help Willowleaf?" He mewed kindly. Sunpaw glared at him as he turned his back to the golden apprentice. He knew that the older apprentice was trying to be nice, but he was fed up with getting shamed about not knowing stuff. He walked over to Willowleaf.

"Do you need any help?" He asked. She huffed.

"No." She snapped. "Go to sleep or comfort your brother or something. You're no use here." She turned back to Cheetahstride's limp body. The spotted tom was unconscious. Sunpaw sighed. He turned to go to his nest in the den, but Moonpaw intercepted him. "Hey." He mewed. "Want to sleep with me, tonight?" Sunpaw nodded, suddenly feeling tired. He yawned. Moonpaw chuckled and lead him back to the apprentice's den. Sunpaw curled up next to his brother gratefully. Soon his brother was fast asleep. Sunpaw began to feel restless. He stood up carefully and stepped over Moonpaw.

"I thought you were asleep." Sunpaw looked around to see Lightstar sitting there. The white tom laughed softly.

"I couldn't sleep." He replied.

"I saw how Barkpaw and Willowleaf treated you. I want you to know that I don't agree with their behavior." Lightstar's gaze softened, and he looked Sunpaw in the eye. Sunpaw knew he really meant it, but he just shrugged.

"It's fine. Besides, Barkpaw hasn't really done anything." He avoided meeting his leader's eyes.

"I can tell that you don't believe your own words." Lightstar shifted his paws. Sunpaw looked away, unable to respond.

"S'all right." He mumbled eventually. Lightstar came and sat beside him. He curled his tail around the small apprentice.

"You're not alright. I can see it clear as day. You're struggling. You resent me for my decision. Look me in the eye, son. Tell me truth." Lightstar looked at him almost imploringly. Sunpaw scooted away angrily.

"Don't 'son' me! You have no idea what I've gone through. I've lost

everything. My mother, my dream of becoming a warrior, my close relationship with my brother, my *happiness*, for StarClan's sake. Everything I've ever known is *gone*!" Sunpaw didn't care that he'd raised his voice; He didn't care that Moonpaw was staring at him, wide-eyed. "I bet you didn't know what is was like to lose your mother when you were *four moons old*. I know when my father is going to die. I know what my brother's warrior name is going to be, and who his mate is going to be.

"I know how your former mate died. I know she hates you and wants nothing to do with you and that she only ever loved Vinestripes. I know a lot of things that a seven moon old cat shouldn't ever have to bear the weight of knowing. I know about your secrets. I hate being a medicine cat apprentice and I hate Willowleaf. I hate the musty smell of the medicine den. I hate how I'm treated every day of my life: like I'm some kind of burr stuck in someone's pelt.

"I hate my life, and I hate this Clan. And you know what, I hate *you*. I hate you more than anything else because you are part of the reason I'm treated like a piece of dirt all the time. I hate how your decision made my life horrible. I hate how *I'm* shamed because of the decision *you* made. I'm done. I've had enough. I've had enough of being treated terribly, like I don't deserve to live here. You probably hate me because I'm the *spawn* of your former mate's brother. I hate you more than anything, Lightstar. I hate you!" He panted for breath. He didn't care that there were more stares than before now. More than half the Clan was outside the apprentice's den, listening to his rant. Sunpaw pushed his way through the entrance, ignoring Lightstar's shocked expression. The golden tom walked toward the thorn tunnel, not meeting any cat's eyes. He growled.

"What are you looking at?" He snarled. He narrowed his eyes and raced through the barrier. He ran. He ran until he had no idea where he was and there was no ThunderClan scent but his own. He looked around, wild-eyed. He slowed, realizing that he had run straight out of ThunderClan territory. He collapsed on the grass. He couldn't think of anything except of how much he resented Lightstar. His heart thumped against his chest, threatening to snap his rib cage. Sunpaw didn't care whether he lived or died.

I might as well die. He thought. *No cat would care.* He slumped against the ground and closed his eyes. *Maybe I'll just die now.*

Maybe StarClan will spare me living the rest of my life. His heartbeat slowed as he attempted to calm himself. He struggled against his anger at his Clan and his desire to sleep. He curled into a ball. Sunpaw let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding. Suddenly his surroundings flooded his senses.
He saw trees above him, outlined against the thin sliver of moonlight in the dark sky. He felt the cool grass against his hot pelt, and a gentle breeze. He tasted the bitterness of his screaming at Lightstar. He flailed around. *Don't think of him. Think of your future.* He could smell the sharp scent of a rowan. He heard a stream bubbling nearby. He fought the urge to throw himself in the water and hold his breath until he drifted into its depths. He crawled to edge of the stream, considering it. He looked down into the dark, swirling water.
Then, he did it.

He threw himself in.

"It's Been One Heck of a Day"

•Brackenstar•

Brackenstar huddled in his den. He hated rain more than anything. Except Darkmist, that was. Darkmist was his arch nemesis. *It's funny how such a kind, loving cat came from him,* Brackenstar thought, watching Beepaw tussle with his denmate in the clearing. Jaggedpaw and Beepaw were mock fighting. Brackenstar sighed happily. He wished he were as carefree as who he liked to think of as his son: Beepaw. He loved Beepaw like the little apprentice was his son. He loved him so much more than the ginger tom could ever imagine. Brackenstar felt guilty.
Shouldn't his loyalty be to Dawnmist and her unborn kits? He ran out of his den into the rain and streaked across the camp towards the nursery. He stopped at the entrance and shook himself dry.
"Dawnmist?" He asked, as his eyes slowly adjusted the pale light of the den. He heard a loud purr. A cream colored she-cat leaned against him.
"Hey, Brackenstar." Dawnmist rubbed his muzzle with her own.
"What brings you here?" She purred even louder this time.
"I came to see you, obviously. I can't wait until our kits are born." He laughed. "How much longer now?"
"Any day. Sedgefur told me not to panic if I get slight pains now and then." As if on cue, she gasped, the whites of her eyes visible. He pressed up against her. He fought the urge to wail even though he wasn't the one experiencing the pain.
"Do you need me to fetch Sedgefur?" He asked frantically. She drew in a sharp breath. Then she gave a slight nod.
"Yes, please." She managed. Brackenstar ran for the medicine den.
"What in StarClan's name? Any cat would think that Dawnmist was about to start kitting!" Sedgefur appeared at the mouth of her den. "What happened, Brackenstar?"
"It *is* Dawnmist." He panted. "She's having pains. She said you told her not to panic, but I don't think this is a 'slight pain.'" The old medicine cat called for her former apprentice, Bloomshade.

"Fetch raspberry leaves, borage, and whatever else we use for kitting." She added. Brackenstar heard rustling in the den, and Bloomshade's apprentice, Mossypaw poked her head out.
"Raspberry leaves? I think we're almost out." She mewed. Sedgefur huffed.
"Just get whatever we have, then." She snapped. She and Brackenstar hurried toward the nursery. Dawnmist was on the floor, panting for breath. She lifted her head up as they entered. Brackenstar rushed to her side. Sedgefur pressed her paw against Dawnmist's swollen flank. She turned to him. "They're coming too early. One of them is the wrong way. I could feel it." Brackenstar stared at her, panic rising in his chest.
"Is there anything you can do for her? Is there anything I can do?" He asked anxiously. Bloomshade and Mossypaw appeared on either side of him, jaws full of herbs. Mossypaw took her bundle of herbs over to Sedgefur. Bloomshade did the same. Then she pressed against Brackenstar's flank.
"Dawnmist is strong. She'll be okay. The kits too." Brackenstar was grateful for her words, but all he could do was nod. Dawnmist yowled. His attention snapped back to his mate. Sedgefur was chewing up herbs for her while Mossypaw murmured something into her ear. Her shriek ripped through the air. Brackenstar lunged for her, but Bloomshade blocked his path. The tortoiseshell she-cat hissed slightly. "You'll do nothing but get in the way. Leave her be for now." He nodded again. He could see a spasm ripple through his mate's body.
Dawnmist shrieked again and again. Something was wrong. Brackenstar could feel it; something was terribly wrong. He paced around the entrance to the den. Bloomshade was by his side the whole time, attempting to reassure him. He couldn't be calmed down. He was too worried about the beautiful cream she-cat lying in agony in her nest. It was quiet now.
What happened? He wondered. He poked his head into the den. Sedgefur looked up at him, her face expressionless. Bloomshade had her head bowed and Mossypaw was licking a small bundle. Two others lay beside her.

My kits? Brackenstar thought. It was dead quiet in the den. He hurried to where Dawnmist lay in her nest. She was deathly still. Too still for his liking. "I'm sorry, Brackenstar." Mossypaw whispered in his ear. "She's gone. She hunts with StarClan." She

pressed close as he wailed and buried his nose her still fur. It was steadily growing cold. "Come meet your kits." She murmured. Brackenstar could only feel numb with grief as Mossypaw brought three tiny bundles to him. They wriggled when she set them down in the nest and immediately scrambled for their mother's belly.

Brackenstar couldn't bear to have them try to suckle from his dead mate. He gently pulled them away from her body and curled up with them. "Should we bring her out to the clearing?" Sedgefur asked quite coldly. He shook his head.

"Not yet." He croaked. "Let me grieve. *Please*." He huddled with his newborn kits.

"They need to eat, Brackenstar. What will we do? There is no other queen in SkyClan." Mossypaw pointed out sensibly. Brackenstar nodded.

"We'll have to take to another Clan. One of the other Clans must have a nursing queen." He mewed decidely. He glanced down at the kits; one tom and two she-kits. Bloomshade's mouth dropped.

"Another Clan? You'd really give up your kits to another Clan?" She asked incredulously. Sedgefur huffed and left the den

"Not give them up. Just until they're weaned." He replied. The tom squirmed. He yawned and snuggled up next to his sister. Brackenstar would have to give them names soon. The tom was cream, like his mother, while his sister had Brackenstar's own fiery orange pelt. The other she-kit was a pale ginger with brighter orange patches. He purred slightly, the joy of seeing his kits overwhelming his grief. Mossypaw settled down next to him.

"You should give them names. You wouldn't want another Clan to name now, would you?" Brackenstar saw sense in the pretty tabby's words. He stared down at the tiny, perfect little bodies.

"Dawnmist wanted one of them to be named Patchkit. We had talked about names just a few days ago. The little ginger she-kit will be Patchkit." Mossypaw nodded.

"What about her sister?" She prompted. Brackenstar looked down at her. Her pelt was identical to his. Grief clouded his mind for a few moments before he answered.

"She will be named after her mother. Her name will be Mistkit." He decided. "Their brother will be-" He broke off as the tom yowled. Brackenstar saw razor-sharp claws slide out. "Wolfkit, for his bold personality. I can tell that he will be a little fighter already. Patchkit, Mistkit, and Wolfkit. Welcome, my little ones."

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Brackenstar, Mossypaw, and Beepaw each had a kit in their mouth. Brackenstar was dreading this. He didn't want to give up the kits that he had only just met. They were going to go to ThunderClan, if Lightstar would accept them. Wolfkit swung from his jaws and let out a high-pitched shrill. The little tom was going to be very bold, that was for sure. Brackenstar halted at the border, and signaled for his Clanmates to do the same. He dropped Wolfkit in between his paws.

"We will wait for a patrol." He said. Mossypaw and Beepaw nodded. A little while later, the leaves rustled and a black she-cat burst through the bushes. Her fur bristled when she saw the SkyClan cats.

"Brackenstar. What a pleasure." She mewed drily. "What do want?"

"Hollypelt," Brackenstar dipped his head. "We wish to speak with Lightstar." The rest of Hollypelt's patrol fanned out behind her. They escorted Brackenstar and his Clanmates towards the ThunderClan camp. The white she-cat, Icewing, padded next to him.

"What are you bringing kits here for?" She asked curiously. Brackenstar flicked his ear to show her that he had heard, but he had no intent in dropping Wolfkit to tell her. He simply pressed on. She snorted, although she didn't sound hostile like her Clanmates. They arrived at ThunderClan's camp soon after. Lightstar leapt down from the Highledge as they entered. His gaze flicked to the SkyClan cats. Brackenstar could tell that he was surprised, though he hid it well.

"Greetings. What can I do for you?" He hesitated slightly. Brackenstar knew that he had almost called him 'brother.' He gently set down Wolfkit.

"I have brought my kits here. They need someone to nurse them. Dawnmist is dead, and we have no other queens. I ask only that one of your queens nurses them until they can be weaned." Brackenstar pleaded. Lightstar nodded.

"I will ask Pinefrost. Oakpool, would you fetch her, please?" The white tom asked. The dark tabby warrior was soon back with a dark gray she-cat. Brackenstar dipped his head to her.

"Will you nurse my kits, please?" He asked. "My mate, Dawnmist, died during their birth." Pinefrost's gaze softened.

"Of course, if it's okay with Lightstar." She said with a glance at her leader. "I'm sorry for your loss." Brackenstar mewed his thanks before passing Wolfkit over to her.
"Be good, my son. Know that I love you. I'll see you soon." Wolfkit gazed up at him with wide eyes. The newborn kit trembled.
"Why do I have to go?" He asked innocently. Brackenstar nuzzled him.
"Be a good kit and don't question. Pinefrost will take care of you." He said simply. He nudged the kit toward the dark gray queen.
"This is Wolfkit. The other two are Patchkit and Mistkit." Pinefrost nodded. Mossypaw and Beepaw padded up with his other kits. They set them down in front of her. Brackenstar nudged Patchkit. The little ginger-and-orange kit huddled beside her brother. Mistkit did the same.

"G'bye, Brackenstar." She mewed, gazing up at him. "See you soon." She rubbed against him one last time before he was able to tear his eyes away. He purred and licked the top of her head.

"Yes. I'll see you soon," he promised. He and his Clanmates left the camp and head back toward their territory. Brackenstar wasn't ready to go home yet, though. Instead, he veered toward the edge of Clan territory. He needed some space to process what had just happened. "You guys go on ahead. I need a bit of time." Mossypaw stopped.

"I understand, but you're heading out of Clan territory. Who know what dangers are out there? If you're going to go there, let us come with you." Beepaw nodded eagerly, his eyes shining. Brackenstar suspected the young tom was eager at the prospect of going somewhere most cats never went. He sighed and dipped his head.

"Very well." He mewed reluctantly. "You may come with me." They were soon on unfamiliar land. Brackenstar tasted the air for any scent of danger. The air was clear. He broke into a run, not caring if Mossypaw and Beepaw kept up. He stopped by a clear, bubbling stream. He then saw the shape of a golden-furred cat by the edge. As he watched, the cat hurled itself into the swirling water. Brackenstar ran for the stream. He dove in to save the cat. Now that he was close, he could tell it was a young tom, around Beepaw's age. He faintly recognized the scent. He gripped the tom's scruff and yanked him up. The little cat's weight dragged him down. He fought the urge to let go and swim to the surface for a breath.

He churned his paws and pushed upward. He gasped for breath when he reached to surface. He dragged the apprentice onto the bank. The young cat coughed up a mouthful of water.

"Why did you save me?" He asked weakly. He pulled himself up to his paws. Brackenstar snorted angrily. This cat had gotten him drenched and cold. This is how he was going to thank him? This arrogant young tom had a faint trace of ThunderClan on him.

"Don't you want to be saved? You were drowning, for StarClan's sake!" He snapped. The golden tom lashed his soaking wet tail.

"I did that on purpose so I could end my miserable life!" He retorted. "Why else would I hurl myself in? I've had enough with my horrible life!" His hackles were up. He then relaxed. "Brackenstar?" He gasped. "What are you doing here, outside of Clan territory?" Brackenstar stared at him, confused.

"Nevermind what I'm doing here. What about you? You're a mere apprentice!" He exclaimed. The tom growled.

"I'm no apprentice! My name is Sun, just Sun. I'm a-a loner." Brackenstar saw Sun slide out his claws. He peered closer at the golden-furred, amber-eyed tom.

"Sunpaw? You're not a loner! You're a ThunderClan apprentice. The medicine cat apprentice, if I'm not mistaken." He circled around Sunpaw. "What are you doing here?" He asked.

"I told you. I'm here to end my miserable excuse for a life. That's all there is to it." The young tom snapped at the SkyClan leader. He stalked off with his tail held high. Brackenstar darted ahead and cut off his escape. Mossypaw and Beepaw caught up to him, out of breath.

"Brackenstar. Where did you run off to?" Mossypaw asked. She stumbled to a halt. Her eyes widened when she saw Sunpaw. "Who's that?" She added. Brackenstar jerked in front of him again.

"This," he growled, "is a bird-brained, runaway, ThunderClan medicine cat apprentice named Sunpaw." Beepaw sniffed him. Sunpaw flinched and scooted away.

"Get away! I don't like little apprentices sticking their noses in my fur!" He snarled. Beepaw smirked, but it was friendly.

"I might be little, but I'm older than you. You haven't even been an apprentice for a moon!" He laughed, his eyes sparkling. Sunpaw looked horrified, as though he realized he'd just addressed the older tom rudely.

"I-I'm sorry." He stuttered. He ducked his head, seeming

embarrassed. Brackenstar huffed. *Sunpaw is such a mouse-brain.* He thought. He circled the young apprentice.

"Show some respect for others." He grunted. He sighed. Suddenly his pelt pricked. He felt as though someone was watching him. He glanced around to see if the others felt the same. Every cat had their fur bushed, and their ears back. The scent of rogue flooded the clearing.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

"Too Many She-Cats"

•Riverstorm•

Riverstorm ran. He ran all the way back to the place he swore he would never go again: The Drowning Brook. He and Pantherfur had called it that after Lucky's accident and Chance's disappearance. Rain began to fall. Riverstorm slowed down. He trudged along in the newly churned mud. Thunder cracked in the distance. Lightning flashed. The rain was falling heavily now. He shook out his now drenched fur.

Suddenly he found himself outside somewhere very familiar. This was the holly bush that his mother had sheltered him and his littermates in growing up. He sniffed but he couldn't smell anything with the pouring rain. He ducked inside the leafy bush. He pricked his ears for movement. *Nothing.* He lay down to rest. Surely Cranestar wouldn't follow him here. A rustling behind made him jump up.

Riverstorm whirled around and growled. "Who's there?" He demanded. He sniffed again, but there wasn't a trace of anything. Eventually he settled down again. He was almost asleep, lulled by the falling rain, when thunder crashed again. He jumped, his fur pricking. The silhouette of a cat was outlined in the next flash of lightning. Riverstorm's fur was on end now. When the bright flash struck again, the shape was gone. Riverstorm felt as though eyes were watching him. He couldn't shake the feeling as he attempted to get some rest.

He felt restless. He got up and stretched, padded around the den a bit, and yawned. He lay back down, the comforting *pitter-patter* of the rain around him. He watched the fat drops of rain fall in the darkening sky. Night was here. In fact, it was almost moonhigh before Riverstorm fell asleep.

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Riverstorm woke up to thunder crashing yet again. The rain hadn't stopped all through the night. It was almost sunhigh, from

what he could tell. He got up and padded to the entrance to the bush. The air was thick and hot. Riverstorm could barely breathe. The rain wasn't cool and refreshing, but warm and it simply made him feel hotter as it fell on him. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed overhead. His fur was stuck in clumps from the rain the night before.
He yawned and set out to trek even further from RiverClan. He found himself traveling around the lake, far out of Clan territory. Suddenly he heard a yowl, as if someone was in pain. He ran toward the source of the noise. The yowl turned to a shriek, again and again. He hurried to a clearing in the woods. A she-cat was lying there. She seemed to be perfectly fine despite her shrieks. She stopped when she saw Riverstorm. Then she smirked and stood up. "You fell for it," she drawled. He stared at her. There was something familiar about her.
"For what?" He asked warily. "What did I fall for?" He took a step away from the stranger. She laughed as he bumped into something furry behind him. He whipped around to see another she-cat standing there. More spread out behind her. She smiled a crooked, snaggle-toothed grin that made Riverstorm suspicious of her.
"She's right. I can't believe you fell for it." She snorted. "Good work, Ember." The dark gray she-cat simply grunted.

"It's not that hard to lay on the ground an yowl your head off. Thanks anyway, Light Feather." Her dusty brown companion snarled. She lashed her tail.

"It's Light to you, *Ember*. Don't you ever add 'Feather' on the end again. Do you hear me? Never again!" Light Feather had her face against Ember's. She snarled. Ember cowered under her as she cuffed her around the ears. "Do you hear me?" Light Feather thundered. Ember nodded, her whole body trembling. Riverstorm was watching the scene before him in horror. How could anyone be so cruel about what another cat called them?

"Light." A yellow tom rested his tail on Light Feather's shoulder. "The Ancients were peaceful." This phrase seemed to mean something to Light Feather, because she growled at him.

"I'm not one of the Ancients. I may be a descendant, but I'm *not* an Ancient!" She whipped her tail in his face before turning back to Holly. "Fetch the Growler. Now, Jag." She added when he hesistated. Jag scurried off. A black-and-white she-cat approached her.

"Are you sure, Light? Are sure it's necessary to bring the Growler?" She asked tentatively. Light Feather rolled her eyes. Then she slashed at the she-cat's eyes with razor sharp claws. Fury lit up her eyes and she clawed until the she-cat's eyes ran with blood, slowly dripping down her now bloodied cheeks.

"I think that will teach you not to question me, Holly." She stalked away, Ember trailing behind her. Riverstorm stared after them in shock. What kind of place was this? A pale gray she-cat appeared by his side.

"Hello. My name is Fury. It's really Furious Eagle, but Light Feather doesn't like us to use our full name. Light, I should say. Let me show you around." Furious Eagle didn't wait for a response before dashing off among the trees. It was all Riverstorm could do to keep up with her. He gulped.

"What kind of place is this? I've only seen one tom, Light Feather treats you all badly, and Holly just got blinded. Who even are you all?" He asked. He stopped as she turned around to look at him.

"We are the Descendants. We are descended from the Ancients, a group of cats who lived before the dawn of the Clans. There are two toms here. Light is only taking care of us and Holly- well, Holly Berry got blinded. I'm sure Light meant no harm." She glanced down. "Won't you stay here, tonight?" She asked suddenly. He took a step back.

"I-I'm not sure. Let me think about it. As for your names, why doesn't Light Feather like you to use your full name? That seems silly to me." He concluded. Furious Eagle glanced away.

"That's our custom, I suppose. I'm not the leader, so I don't know why she makes the decision she does. She prefers to be called Light, so I'm Fury same as Holly Berry is Holly and Ember Sparks is Ember. I don't question our ways, and you shouldn't either." She huffed as though she was annoyed. Then she turned around and kept walking.

"How do you know about the Clans?" Riverstorm asked.

She didn't turn around as she answered, "The Ancients are your ancestors too, you know. Every kit here is taught the ways of the Clans as well as the Descendants. You're a warrior from RiverClan. What's your name?" She glanced over her shoulder shyly.

"Riverstorm," he replied. The rain was letting up now. Sunlight shone through the leafy foliage. Scarce raindrops splashed on his back. He shook his fur out. Furious Eagle didn't stop walking. She

broke into a run at the top of a hill. Riverstorm raced behind her, the wind streaming through his fur. Suddenly she came to a halt.

"Stormy!" She called. A silvery gray she-cat appeared next to her.

"Light Feather isn't around right now. Call me Stormy Sky." Her voice was smooth and soft. She dipped her head to Riverstorm. "And you are?"

"Riverstorm." He dipped his head in return to her gesture. Furious Eagle cleared her throat.

"Let's go. I want to show you around before nightfall, Riverstorm." She set off down the slope, with Riverstorm close behind her. Stormy Sky followed him. Furious Eagle stopped outside a small bush. "This is Holly Berry's den." She announced. "The one next to it is Ember Sparks'. Next to hers is Dewy Grass', and then Snowy Frost's. Come on, I'll show you your den for the night. It's too late to travel now." Stormy Sky nodded eagerly.

"That's true. There's no sense in getting stuck in the dark. The sun is going down now." Riverstorm nodded his agreement. He liked the gentle she-cat. She was kind and friendly. Several other she-cats appeared near them to go to their dens for the night. "Falling Rain. New Moon. Sandy Rocks. Good to see you. I was just showing our guest to his den." Furious Eagle nodded to each of the three she-cats. "He will be guarded by Calm Brook, of course." She added, seeing a suspicious glance on New Moon's face. She turned around and kept leading Riverstorm and Stormy Sky. Riverstorm hadn't realized he was tired till just now; his paws felt like they were about to fall off. Stormy Sky ran ahead of him to catch up with Furious Eagle. He caught snatches of what she said.

"Are you taking him to-" and "the Growler-" and "But Ember Sparks-" Finally Furious Eagle and Stormy Sky stopped outside a dark cave that looked as though it hadn't been touched in many, many moons. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling; leaves and small bones of some sort of prey littered the ground. Riverstorm stared around at this desolate excuse for a den. He was almost lost for words.

"Is this where *I'm* going to stay?" He managed. Stormy Sky laughed softly. Her soft blue eyes shone in the dim light.

"This den is for visitors." She answered in that smooth, sweet voice of hers. Riverstorm looked around again, unimpressed.

"I take it you don't have visitors very often, then?" He asked drily. She shook her head. Her beautiful, silver fur seemed to be glowing

just then. Riverstorm glanced away, not wanting to be sucked in by her beauty. He wondered if she had a mate. Surely such a pretty she-cat would by now. She had to be close to his age. His fur pricked. He was embarrassed, as if he had voiced his thoughts out loud.

"Good night." Furious Eagle cut in rather coldly. Riverstorm dipped his head.

"Thank you for letting me stay here." He replied. Then she and Stormy Sky left him to sleep. He happened to overhear their conversation as they left.

"I saw how you were staring into each other's eyes!" That was Furious Eagle. She sounded mad. Stormy Sky huffed.

"It's not like that." She protested.

"You purposefully are drawing him in with your *beauty*." Furious Eagle emphasized the last word, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Let me explain-" Stormy Sky began.

"He's mine! I found him, I set it all up, *I* escorted him here. Not you, but *me.* You did nothing except steal him away from me. I should have never introduced you to him. He's mine, all mine!" Riverstorm stared after their fading shapes in the distance in shock. Another she-cat padding after *him*? His mind was whirling with thoughts of Sorrelstream and RiverClan as he finally fell asleep for night. Or so he thought.

A/N: Just to stop any confusion, the next chapter is going to start just after Sunpaw tried to drown himself in the stream.

-Fawn

"Stupid Life Decisions"

•Sunpaw•

Sunpaw shut his eyes tight. He held his breath and counted the seconds till he drowned. *One. Two. Three. Four*. By fifteen, he was already starting to want to go up for air but he forced himself to stay in the murky depths of the dark water. He heard the sound of someone else plunging in near him, but he didn't care. Teeth grasped his scruff and yanked upwards. Paws churned the water around him and thrusted up. Sunpaw fought his savior to let go. The cat dragged up out of the dark, gushing, sucking water. He spluttered and coughed up a mouthful of water.

"What did you do that for?" He demanded angrily, yet weakly from his drowning session. The cat before was a bright orange tom. He seemed vaguely familiar. The orange tom huffed.

"Don't you want to be saved?" He asked. Sunpaw shook his head. "You were drowning, for StarClan's sake!" The elder cat added.
"I did that on purpose! I want to end my miserable life!" Sunpaw retorted. He lashed his tail. "Why else do you think I would hurl myself in? I've had enough with my horrible life!" His hackles were up, his fur bristling. Suddenly his eyes widened in disbelief.
"Brackenstar?" He asked incredulously."What are you doing outside of Clan territory?"

The orange tom scoffed.

"Nevermind what I'm doing here. What about you? You're a mere apprentice!" Brackenstar exclaimed. Sunpaw raced to come up with a good answer.
"I'm no apprentice! My name is-" his heart was thumping so loudly against his chest he was sure even RiverClan all the way across the lake could hear it. "Sun, just Sun." He finished quickly. "I'm a-a loner." He saw the SkyClan leader eyeing him suspiciously.
"Sunpaw? You're not a loner! You're a ThunderClan apprentice. The medicine cat apprentice, if I'm not mistaken. What are you doing here?" He asked, circling around Sunpaw. Sunpaw felt uneasy.

"I told you!" He stated. "I'm here to end my miserable life! That's all there is to it." He turned to walk away from the bright orange tom. Brackenstar darted ahead and cut off his escape. Sunpaw hissed to himself. Just then, two SkyClan cats came trotting up behind him.
"Brackenstar," the she-cat puffed, "where did you go? Who's that?" She added, obviously seeing Sunpaw for the first time. Brackenstar growled.
"This is a bird-brained, runaway, ThunderClan medicine cat apprentice named Sunpaw." He replied. The other cat sniffed Sunpaw. He scooted away angrily.

"Get away! I don't like little apprentices sticking their noses in my fur!" He snapped. The young orange-and-white cat snorted, as though he was laughing.
"I may be small, but I'm older than you. You haven't even been an apprentice for a moon!" He laughed again, his eyes twinkling. Sunpaw's eyes grew round.
"I-I'm sorry," He stammered. Brackenstar padded up to stand next to him.

"Show some respect for others." He grunted. Suddenly all of them bushed out their fur. Sunpaw could sense danger nearby. *Please don't have a vision right now,* He willed himself. He usually had one when he was upset or excited about something. Every cat instinctively put their backs against one another and slid out their claws. The over-whelming stench of rogue flooded over them.

"Well, well, well. What do have here?" A she-cat stepped out from the line of trees, with three others behind her. She was dusty brown, while the tom next to her was yellow. The other she-cat was tick-furred and a very dark gray. The last was so mangy and dirty that Sunpaw couldn't tell what color it was. "What do we have here?" The brown she-cat repeated.

Brackenstar stepped forward. "You have no right to threaten us!" He hissed. She hissed right back. The yellow tom and the dark gray tabby advanced and circled around the group of Clan cats.

"I can do what I like." The she-cat snarled. "And I want to take all of you back to my camp as prisoners. Tell me your names. All of you!" Sunpaw jumped as she leapt towards him. He could hear a growl rising in her throat.

"S-Su-Sunp-paw." He stuttered nervously. The gray tabby she-cat hissed in his ear. He jumped again. "S-Stop!" He pleaded. The

rogues laughed.

"*I admire your bravery, little one*." Sunpaw jumped yet again as he thought he heard a voice whisper in his ear. Neither of the rogue she-cats were near him anymore. In fact, no cat was close enough to whisper to him without another cat hearing them. "*I can see your confusion*." The voice continued. "*I'm over here*." He whipped around and locked eyes with the mangy cat behind the dusty brown she-cat. "*Here I am.*" The voice chuckled. "*Your name is Sunpaw, right?"*

How do you know that? Sunpaw shot back. *What's* your *name?* It was clear now that this cat was a tom. The mangy cat stared him down, his gaze seeming to burn right through the young apprentice. "*That's not your business. And nevermind, you can call me the Growler.*" He answered. "*Tell me what you're doing here."* He almost seemed to grunt. "*We don't get many visitors."* His dark, murky eyes twinkled from across the clearing. He was mysterious and mystifying to Sunpaw. He seemed to hold all the answers, but withheld them from others. "*Tell me.*" He seemed to growl, snapping Sunpaw back to their conversation.

I'm here because I ran away from my home.

"Which Clan?" The mangy cat prompted. His voice was rich and deep, not at all what a mangy, old cat's voice would be like. Sunpaw was astonished. *How do you know about the Clans?* He asked.

"Sunpaw! Pay attention!" Brackenstar interrupted. "We're currently being 'imprisoned.'" He mimicked one of the rogues. She snarled at him. Sunpaw looked around, startled. How much time had passed while he and the Growler had been talking? He began to walk with Brackenstar towards the edge of the clearing, into the woods.

"*We are the Descendants.*" The Growler whispered. "*We are descendants of the Ancients. She will never forgive Jay's Wing for making our ancestors leave the lake. She has sworn vengeance against the Tribe and the Clans*." Sunpaw's eyes went wide.

Who is 'she?' He asked. The Growler glanced over at him slyly. "Light." He whispered. His voice was suddenly raspy, as though he was very old. Sunpaw realized that the mangy tom was actually padding beside him. Now that he was close, Sunpaw could see that he had deep hazel eyes. Not warm at all, but cold and uninviting. "The one leading you away right now. I'm going to leave now. Light will get suspicious and her consequences will not be few or feeble. Hurry up now, I'll keep talking to you."

Sunpaw nodded. *What is your actual name?* He asked. The mangy cat hissed in his head.
"*That's none of your business, Sunpaw.*" His tone had changed; he sounded as though he was considering murdering someone at that moment. His voice was harsh and flat. The Growler hurried to catch up with the yellow tom ahead of Brackenstar's Clanmates, Mossypaw and Beepaw.

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Sunpaw awoke sometime later in a big den full of cobwebs. It was dusty except for a few faint pawprints. It looked as though it hadn't been used in as many moons as the Growler had been alive. He got up and stretched. He quickly remembered the young RiverClan tom who had been sleeping when they had come in the night before and sat back down promptly. Brackenstar and Beepaw were huddled next to each other across the cave. Mossypaw slept near them, her glossy pelt shining the early morning sun light.

"Good morning." Sunpaw looked over the see the dark gray RiverClan tom watching him. Amusement glimmered in his eyes. Sunpaw sniffed.

"Good morning." He replied curtly. The warrior laughed. His bright blue eyes shone.

"My name's Riverstorm. What's yours?" He asked. Sunpaw looked away a moment, considering whether to answer the older tom.

"Sunpaw." He stated. He twitched uncomfortably, feeling as though eyes were boring into the back of his pelt. He turned around quickly to see a silvery gray she-cat standing there.
"Good morning, Riverstorm. Good morning, Sunpaw. Would you kindly wake up your companions?" She dipped her head to each of them and padded away. Sunpaw went over the SkyClan cats, but Riverstorm stood fixed to the spot, gazing after the she-cat. He shook himself and followed her out of the cave.
"Where are you going?" Sunpaw blurted. Riverstorm swung around.
"None of your business." Sunpaw's tail twitched angrily. He was sort of happy that he had accidentally stepped on the young warrior's face in the dark last night. *None of your business, indeed.* Sunpaw felt as though he had heard that a lot lately. *None of your business, Sunpaw. That's not for you to know, Sunpaw. Stop being nosy, Sunpaw. Mind your own business. Keep out of my fur!* Sunpaw lashed his tail.

He ran out of the cave into the woods. He didn't care that some cat was chasing after him.
"Sunpaw! Wait!" It was Beepaw. He caught up to Sunpaw and stood in front of him, blocking his path. "Stop it, Sunpaw. You have to stay at the cave. Didn't you hear Light say that there would be serious consequences if we tried to escape?" Sunpaw shook his head and sighed. He headed back towards the cave wearily. Suddenly an orange-and-white tom appeared from behind a tree.
"Have you seen a dark gray tom from RiverClan?" He asked.
Beepaw's eyes bugged out.
"That's Cranestar." He whispered into Sunpaw's ear. Sunpaw took a step back.
"Maybe." He answered. A sharp nudge from Beepaw silenced him before he said more.
"Is his name Riverstorm?" Cranestar asked. Sunpaw nodded fearfully. Beepaw gulped beside him. Cranestar's eyes gleamed.
"Take me to him."

"Just Another Life Gone"

•Brackenstar•

Brackenstar shifted slightly. He yawned. Pale dawn light was streaming into the dusty cave. Suddenly, Sunpaw and Beepaw came bursting into the cave. There was an orange-and-white tom behind them. *Cranestar.* Brackenstar loathed the older tom with a passion. Cranestar had a wild, crazed look in his eye. "Have you seen Riverstorm?" He growled. Brackenstar answered honestly, "No." He honestly hadn't *seen* Riverstorm. It had been too dark last night when he, Sunpaw, Mossypaw, and Beepaw had come to the cave. He had met the young warrior at a Gathering only once. The dark gray tom was kind but quiet. Cranestar growled again.

"Stop lying." He grunted. "Dark gray. Impudent, ignorant, dastardly young tom. Wastes prey just to claim it was another Clan that did it to provoke a war. You know exactly who I'm talking about." Brackenstar nodded thoughtfully.
"I *do* know who you're talking about, but I haven't seen him." He was trying to stall his fellow leader to keep him off of Riverstorm's tail. He had a feeling Cranestar was *not* here for a friendly chat with his warrior. Cranestar snorted.

"Sure." He drawled. He rolled his eyes. When they focused on Brackenstar again, they had a murderous look in them. "I'm going to look for my warrior. He needs to be brought home." Brackenstar had another feeling: that if Cranestar found Riverstorm, he wouldn't make it home.

Cranestar whipped around and headed for the den entrance. Brackenstar followed him. The orange-and-white tom was heading toward one of the Descendant's dens. He poked his head inside. Brackenstar heard a shriek that was quickly cut off. Cranestar came out and kept walking. Brackenstar's eyes widened. Had the older tom just killed a Descendant? He hurried and glanced inside the den after Cranestar left. Sure enough, there was a body of a she-cat lying on the ground. She had beautiful silver fur. Brackenstar heard

a hiss behind him. He turned around to see a dusty brown she-cat. Light. She swiped at his face with her claws extended. Then she paused as she saw the body.
"Stormy. Stormy? No!" She turned back to Brackenstar. "You monster! You killed a Successor!" She lunged for him. He took a step back to avoid her.

"You don't understand," he pleaded. "It was him." He flicked his tail towards the silhouette of Cranestar. The tom was running now. Brackenstar could see a dark gray shape ahead of him. Cranestar was gaining on the shape. *Riverstorm!* Brackenstar thought with a pang of fear. "Riverstorm!" He yowled. He ran after Cranestar. He could hear Light chasing after him. "Riverstorm! You need to run!" He yowled again. Cranestar was closer than ever. But Brackenstar was gaining on them. He tackled Cranestar to the ground. He slammed his paws into the tom again and again. Light joined him, but she wasn't helping much. She turned and attacked Brackenstar as well. He was overwhelmed now. Now Cranestar was on top him. He battered Brackenstar over and over, again and again. Light's claws raked his cheek. Brackenstar could that his face was wet. Was it blood or tears?
He turned toward the figure of Riverstorm, still running. "Run! Keep running! Don't look back!" He choked out as loud as he could. *Run. Please.* He begged silently. He could afford to fight. He had more lives than Riverstorm. The problem was that Cranestar did too. His attempts to shove the older tom and Light off of him were feeble now. Cranestar struck him yet again. His claws were unsheathed now. Time seemed to slow. Brackenstar's face was numb now. His paws seeming to strike in slow motion. He exhaled as Cranestar struck harder. Then he blinked.
He was standing in a now familiar place. StarClan's hunting grounds. He stared at the tom before him. "Rocksplitter. Save me." He begged. His brother only stood there looking at him. His chiseled features stared at Brackenstar imploringly. It seemed as though the dark gray tom wanted *his* help. Brackenstar was the one who had just lost a life. He could see the faint shape of his already lost lives wandering around. The shape flickered and then grew more apparent. Brackenstar's life that he had just lost had joined StarClan. Only four more to go before he joined StarClan for once and for all. Then the breath *whooshed* back into his body. Cranestar was standing above him still. Light was staring at him.

"How...?" She started to ask. Cranestar snarled at her.
"Shut up." He snapped at her. His eyes were glazed over with a hungry look. "How many lives do you have left now?" He whispered. Brackenstar grunted. He heaved himself to his paws. Cranestar slammed himself down onto Brackenstar again. Brackenstar heard his spine give a loud *snap*. Sharp pain flooded his senses. He couldn't think, couldn't see right. The only thing he could see was the snarling face of—his arch nemesis?

Darkmist laughed an evil sounding laugh that showed he was enjoying Brackenstar's suffering. The dark tom lunged for Brackenstar's neck. He clamped his teeth around his throat. The only thing Brackenstar could comprehend was that Darkmist and Cranestar were trying to kill him. He tried to fight back, tried to make an effort, tried to save himself from losing another life, but they were too strong.

He found himself in StarClan again. Rocksplitter was staring at him. Another layer was added to the figure of Brackenstar's lives. He felt as though his spirit grew fainter. He was losing hope. He was going to die here, again and again. He would never see his kits again. He inhaled again. The sharp tang of blood hit his nostrils.

Cranestar battered him. Darkmist's jaws were digging into his neck. Even Light was trying to hurt him in one way or another. They truly intended to kill him. He could barely see that there were other members of the Descendants watching the scene. Nobody made a move to help him. Then he saw Mossypaw, Beepaw, and Sunpaw being held back by some of the she-cats. Then Darkmist jerked his head. Brackenstar's neck made a snapping sound.

He was in StarClan again. He only had two lives left now. He was going to die. "Rocksplitter. Will you tell my kits that I love them?" He asked. The tom stared at him.

"You can tell them yourself." He growled. He smelled his blood again. *Oh great.* He thought. He was back for round four.

Darkmist was laughing. "Only two more, Cranestar." He said smugly. How did the dark tom know? Brackenstar hissed weakly.

"Not true. I have four left." He lied. He had barely managed to croak out those six words. Darkmist snorted.

You think I'm going to believe that?" He laughed. "Then I just get to kill you *four* more times." Brackenstar felt sick, and not just because of the taste of blood in his mouth. Suddenly Darkmist brought his paws smashing down on his mouth. His jaw cracked.

Pain exploded again. Then everything was dull. It seemed as though what was happening wasn't even real. But he knew that it was because his jaw, neck, and spine hurt too bad. He had long since given up fighting. The only thing he was fighting now was losing his second to last life.

Rocksplitter shook his sleek, gray head. "Keep fighting. You have to keep fighting." He repeated over and over. Brackenstar didn't know how he could; his neck, spine, and jaw were most likely broken. "Keep fighting, my dear brother." Brackenstar silently begged him, or even anyone for help.

Darkmist and Cranestar were above. "What else can I break?" Darkmist asked. Brackenstar growled with as much gusto as he could muster. He was going to try to fight. He attempted to stand up, ignoring the pain. He couldn't stand, he was too broken. Suddenly a dark gray shape flashed past him.

Riverstorm pounded Cranestar to the ground. He battered the orange-and-white tom. He scored his claws down the tom's face. "Having the 'most powerful warrior' in all the Clans as a mentor really pays off." He taunted. Now Cranestar got to feel what it was like for Brackenstar to be beaten and well- *killed.* Riverstorm was slashing the tom mercilessly. Cranestar could barely fight back now. Then he went still.

Brackenstar felt someone lift him onto their back. He was starting to fade. His consciousness was leaving him. He fought the darkness at first, but then he embraced it. He heard a voice telling him to fight it, but then he would be able to escape the pain. He would get to be with Rocksplitter. Then he thought of Dawnmist and Ashflower. He would get to see some of the ones he loved most. Finally. He heard the soft voice urging him to wake up again, but he didn't want to. He couldn't have even if he wanted to.

Suddenly he saw Ashflower in front of him. She urged to him to try to fight the darkness. But it felt so good. Why was she trying to make him feel the pain again? How could she be so cruel? Maybe she really did love Darkmist more. Maybe she had all along. Maybe she had broken his heart purposefully.

No. He wasn't thinking clearly. She would have never done that to him. She truly loved him. She had always loved him. She wouldn't make him suffer. He embraced the darkness. He would finally be with his mates and brother again. His pain dulled. He was tired, so tired. He would rest now. Then he thought of his kits. He had to

stay alive. It was too late now. Ashflower's face was sorrowful now. The last words he heard before he slipped into the darkness were, "I'm sorry."

"Um, Help?"

•Riverstorm•

Riverstorm was fighting. Fighting for his life. Cranestar may have lost one life, but he had several more. Riverstorm was grappling with Cranestar. He was much younger than Cranestar, so he used his speed to his advantage. The orange-and-white tom may have been older and slower, but he was also more experienced. He seemed to know Riverstorm's next move even before Riverstorm knew it himself. Cranestar paused slashing at his ears only long enough to hiss in his ear, "You fought on the side of that traitor and murderer?" He sounded genuinely bemused at Riverstorm's actions. Riverstorm growled.
"Brackenstar is no murderer or traitor. You are the one who ripped four lives from an honorable leader like him. You are the one who's attacking his own warrior right now." Cranestar delivered another blow to Riverstorm's cheek as he fell silent. Riverstorm felt blood run down his cheek. Then another spurt came from above his eye. He was struggling to see now. A dark tom came out of nowhere and flung himself at Riverstorm. Together, he and Cranestar were driving Riverstorm to ground. *They want to kill me,* Riverstorm realized. That only infuriated him further and drove him on harder. He matched the two toms before him blow-for-blow.

His paws suddenly felt clumsy and slow. He may be strong, but he couldn't beat *two* powerful toms who were trained and deadly alone. Cranestar was fighting him on the side where blood was still running into his eye. The dark tom was on his other side, slashing at him with a fierce passion. He was striking Riverstorm again and again. Riverstorm couldn't think clearly, couldn't see, could barely breathe. He still fought, hoping the apprentices and Brackenstar could get away. None of the Descendant she-cats made a move to help him. He saw out of the corner of his good eye Brackenstar being taken away.

Fear shot through him. *No!* He thought. *Brackenstar!* He hoped

the she-cats would help him. Last time Riverstorm had gotten a good look at the small, orange tom, he had been battered, bleeding, and broken, lying on the ground. He was afraid, more afraid than he had ever been in his life. He was fighting for his life. He suddenly thought of Lucky.

Lucky must have felt this fear. He must have felt this intense fear that surpassed every other emotion. He must have been *terrified* for his life, for his future. Riverstorm suddenly felt peace. He just needed to go with the flow. The river had always been his friend. He started to fight with the flow. Ducking where Cranestar was about to swipe his paw, blocking where the dark tom was about to slash his flank.

He felt calm. He swayed like a wave, his fur rippling like the surface of a stream. He was River, a brave kit born at the edge of a swirling world of dark waters. He was Riverpaw, an eager apprentice who never excelled like his Clanmates, but persevered anyway. He was Riverstorm, a powerful warrior who would fight for his friends to the Place of No Stars and back again without hesitation. He was someone who would fight this battle, and not back down. He fought on, despite any fear he had.

That's when a third cat joined the fight. Light slashed him from behind while the two toms battered him from the sides. He felt his consciousness slipping as he grew weary. He was aware of someone trying to drag Light off of his back. Her needle-sharp claws dug into his back and he yowled with fury and agony all in one. Light hissed in his ear. She sank her teeth into his scruff and yanked upwards. She dug in hard and shook him. Whoever had tried to drag her off was gone now. Riverstorm was surprised he had lasted this long. Surely the end was near.

Suddenly Light was dragged off of his back. Cranestar was still battering him, but the dark tom was just sitting, watching the scene. Riverstorm fought, hoping that someone would help him. He heard Light's yowls as someone took her away. Then a voice entered Riverstorm's mind. "*Be still. Don't fight.*" Riverstorm grew frantic. What kind of creature could talk in his mind?

What are you? He asked the voice. The voice laughed. "*I am a cat, same as you. Like I said, stop fighting. Pretend like you've given up and you're beaten.*" The voice continued. Riverstorm was scared. He had never heard of a cat that could speak in someone else's mind. *Why would I pretend I'm beaten? Then he'll try to finish me off.* The

mysterious voice chuckled again.

"*Exactly. He will think you've been beaten. When he sits up, all smug like he just caught the biggest fish any cat's ever seen, that's when you strike. Catch him by surprise.*" Riverstorm jerked in surprise. He momentarily froze, and Cranestar dealt him yet another blow. *I'm going to attack him again?* He asked incredulously. He suddenly caught the eye of one of the only two toms watching the battle. *You.* He thought, surprised. *You are the one talking to me. But how?* The tom was shaking visibly, as though laughing at him. Riverstorm felt a sudden surge of anger. He fought back with all his might against Cranestar's attacks.

"*Be still, Riverstorm."* Riverstorm fell still. He was desperate, bleeding from a dozen places, he was numb to the pain now. Cranestar sat up in triumph. That's when Riverstorm lunged. He sank his teeth into Cranestar's neck and bit down hard. The orange-and-white tom reared in surprise and fell backwards. The watching cats gave *mrows* of amusement. Riverstorm bit down harder. He felt Cranestar go limp under him. The horrid tom had lost a life. Riverstorm bit down even harder. His jaws hurt now, but he knew he needed the evil tom under him to lose another life.

Cranestar gasped for breath. He tried to stand up and overpower Riverstorm, but Riverstorm's grip was too strong. RiverClan's leader proceeded to shudder and lose another life. Riverstorm wondered what StarClan thought of him and Cranestar just then. "*Yes,*" the tom whispered in his head, "*Only two more lives and then you'll be rid of him.*" Riverstorm opened his jaws and stared down at the dead tom before him. *What am I doing?* He thought. *Have I become just like this disgusting slug in front of me?* Riverstorm could feel the mysterious tom smirk at him from across the- battlefield? Meadow? *Home* of innocent cats? Well, maybe not *so* innocent.

"*You will never be like* him." The voice said reassuringly. Except, Riverstorm wasn't very reassured. He felt horrible. He had stooped so low as to kill Cranestar. *Twice*! He felt like he was a monster, with blood dripping from his pelt, and a snarl painted across his face. *I will NEVER be like him. I will never, never, NEVER be like this horrid beast lying before me.* He told himself. Cranestar cracked open an eye.

His claws reached for Riverstorm's throat and he pulled Riverstorm closer. His breath smelled of rotting fish lying in a pile of fox dung. Riverstorm tried to pull away so he could breathe. Cranestar leaned

closer and with a lightning-quick strike, he hooked his claws into Riverstorm's chest fur and bit down on his throat. Riverstorm's eyes widened. This was it. Just when he had thought he might be able to win, he was going to die. Cranestar hissed and Riverstorm almost gagged.
"You dare rip *lives* from me?" Cranestar threatened. "I'll teach you the real meaning of pain." With those words, he bit down as though trying to crack Riverstorm's bones in half. Riverstorm felt an explosion of pain threaten to take over his whole being. He tried to fight, but he was slipping away, down, down, down. Why was he going down? Why wasn't he going up, to run among the stars with the Clans' starry ancestors? His eyelids fluttered closed. Tears slid down his already wet cheeks. Was it all going to end like this?
He heard someone roar in fury and the weight of Cranestar was lifted off of his chest. He could barely breathe, barely comprehend that he was going to die, here and now. Then the strange tom's voice cut into the eerie silence of his mind. "*Riverstorm. Riverstorm! Fight the darkness! Don't give in. You must win. You must. Do you hear me? You have to fight it."* Then another voice filled his mind.

"Riverpaw, Riverpaw! Please! For your family, for your friends. For me. Riverpaw, please! Fight the darkness. Please, Riverpaw. You can do this! You can. Don't die here, don't die now. I need *you, Riverpaw. Please!"*

The she-cat's voice dissolved into sobs as the memory faded away. Then Riverstorm's consciousness faded away.

"You Missed a Lot, Brother"

•Sunpaw•

Sunpaw's eyes were wide. He watched as Brackenstar was carried away by several she-cats. Dewy, Snowy, and Green, if he wasn't mistaken. Riverstorm was still fighting against Cranestar and another dark colored tom. He, Mossypaw, and Beepaw were being held back by two toms. They were blocking most of their view of the fight, but Beepaw was the littlest of the three, so he spied between the toms' legs. He reported everything he saw to Sunpaw and Mossypaw. The latter watched between the toms' legs on the other side.

Sunpaw was stuck being bored, waiting for news from his fellow apprentices. He wasn't actually bored, rather anxious for more news. He paced around in a small little circle. All he could do was wait. Beepaw suddenly turned around. "They've stopped fighting." He whispered. One of the toms reached down and cuffed Beepaw on the ear.

"Hush." He growled. "Stop chattering like a little bird in a tree." He was a dark, stone gray tom, with a scar slashed across where his right eye should have been. He also had a slash across his right shoulder with three clawmarks. Sunpaw noticed that the other tom, which he had just realized was the Growler, had an almost identical mark on his shoulder. It only had two scratches, though. Sunpaw peered more closely. What could it be for?

"*Stop staring, kit.*" The Growler said in his head. "*Didn't your mother ever teach you not to stare?*" Sunpaw rolled his eyes.

Did your mother ever teach you that it's creepy to talk in someone's head? The Growler got quiet.

"*My mother didn't know, Sunpaw. Only you, me, and Riverstorm know."*

Riverstorm? Sunpaw interrupted. *How can Riverstorm know?*

"You are not the only special one around here, kit. I can go into

anyone's mind." The Growler was still again.
How? Were you born with this power? Sunpaw was aware that Beepaw was whispering something to him, but he paid no attention to his friend. The Growler was silent for a moment.
"*No, I was not born with it.*" He answered simply. Suddenly a third tom came running up.
"Sharp Stones! I was looking for you! Stormy is dead!" The gray tom jerked his head up.
"Stormy is dead? How? Are Thorny and Calm okay?" The tom broke the gap in between him and the Growler for a moment. Sunpaw nodded to Beepaw and Mossypaw before taking off. He darted in between the toms' legs. He weaved in and out of the crowd, glancing over his shoulder every few seconds to make sure his fellow apprentices were still behind him. He took off running even faster once he was past all the Descendant she-cats.
"Beepaw! Mossypaw!" He shouted. "Is anyone following us?" Beepaw shook his head. Looking back, Sunpaw couldn't imagine trying to drown himself yesterday. He had made several new friendships since then. He couldn't imagine leaving them behind. He suddenly wondered where the Descendants had taken Brackenstar.
"Where is Brackenstar?" He asked. Beepaw looked away, as did Mossypaw. "Where's Brackenstar?" He repeated. Mossypaw glared at him before looking down at her paws again.
"He's dead, Sunpaw. Brackenstar has lost all his lives." She broke down in sobs at the last words. Beepaw went to her side. Sunpaw knew they were grieving, but he was too curious.
"How many lives did he lose in that fight?" He asked tentatively. He earned himself a slight glare from Beepaw. The young orange-and-white tom huddled with his Clanmate.
"Five." Mossypaw choked out. Her beautiful tabby coat shone in dying sunlight. Night would fall soon. Sunpaw glanced around.
"We should find shelter soon." He suggested, changing the subject.
"Any ideas where?" Beepaw flicked his tail toward the grove of trees ahead of them. Sunpaw nodded, ready to go. Mossypaw slowly got to her paws. She leaned on Beepaw as they set off. Sunpaw turned his head every so often to make sure that the other two apprentices were following him and didn't need any help.
Suddenly, Sunpaw a shape racing toward them in a blur. "Beepaw, Mossypaw! Someone is following us." He called. Beepaw made eye contact with him. They both stepped in front of the SkyClan

medicine cat apprentice. The approaching cat slowed to a halt in front of them. It was a pure white tom about the same age as Sunpaw. Sunpaw's eyes widened.
"Moonpaw!" He cried. His brother rushed to touch noses with him. Mossypaw broke through of the two tom apprentices. She sniffed, as though disgusted.
"Who is this 'Moonpaw?'" She asked. Sunpaw's eyes shone with happiness. Moonpaw stood beside him, his head held high. He took a step forward as he spoke.
"I'm Sunpaw's brother." He said. "I came from ThunderClan to find him. I'm here to take him home." Sunpaw jerked his head up. He looked at Mossypaw, then Beepaw, and then Moonpaw again.
"Moonpaw, you can't. I need to be here with Beepaw and Mossypaw right now." He tried to explain, but hurt flashed in his brother's eyes for a moment before being replaced by excitement.
"Then I'll come with you. If that's okay with you," he added, with a nod at the SkyClan apprentices. They nodded begrudgingly. Sunpaw was overjoyed. He had so much to tell his brother about what had happened in that past two days. He had made and lost friends. He knew he had made the right choice to stay here with them.
As they made makeshift nests under the trees, Sunpaw told his brother everything that had happened. They made nests right next to each other. Moonpaw cuddled up right next to Sunpaw. He listened wide-eyed as Sunpaw related his journey. his face turned to one of fear when Sunpaw told him how he had tried to drown himself. Moonpaw buried his head in Sunpaw's chest.
"I'm glad you're safe and here with me." The white tom murmured. Sunpaw could only nod as his eyelids drooped.
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The next morning, Sunpaw awoke to smell of fresh-kill. His stomach growled hungrily, and he realized the last time he had eaten was two days ago, in the ThunderClan camp. He sniffed again. Then he opened his eyes. Next to a small pile of fresh-kill was a dark gray tom. Sunpaw leapt out of his nest.
"Riverstorm!" He cried. Moonpaw, Beepaw, and Mossypaw all started and leapt up. The SkyClan apprentices quickly relaxed when they saw the RiverClan warrior, but Moonpaw stayed tense. Riverstorm stiffened when he saw the white tom.
"Who is that?" Riverstorm whispered hoarsely. Now that Sunpaw looked closely, he realized that Riverstorm was battered from his

fight with Cranestar and the strange, dark brown tom. He seemed to have some injury on every part of his body. His fur stuck up in bloody clumps. His ear was torn and ragged on one edge. A red scratch ran down his face, running from his torn ear to his chin. Fur was ripped out along his flank and on his tail. his hind leg was twisted at an odd angle. Blood dripped from a dozen wounds or more. No wonder the gray tom was crouching on the ground, his eyes glazed over in pain. He seemed exhausted.
"That's my brother, Moonpaw." Sunpaw said. "Moonpaw, this is Riverstorm, the best warrior in all the Clans." Riverstorm gave a weak chuckle.
"I don't about in all the Clans." He rasped. Sunpaw laughed. Moonpaw fidgeted.
"How about the best warrior in RiverClan, then?" Sunpaw teased. Riverstorm nodded slightly and closed his eyes. Sunpaw needed some answers before he could let the battered warrior rest.
"Where and how did you get the fresh-kill?" He asked. "How did you escape Cranestar and that dark tom? Can Mossypaw tend to you?" Riverstorm cracked open an eye.
"A couple of Descendant she-cats. I don't know, but I think it was the Descendants. Yes, please." He croaked, answering each of Sunpaw's questions. With that, he was silent. Mossypaw quickly asked Beepaw and Moonpaw to fetch her a few different herbs. She went to Riverstorm's side. She felt his hind leg and checked the rest of his pelt for more injuries. The two worst injuries he had were his leg and the slash running down his face. Mossypaw was still checking him when Moonpaw and Beepaw came running back with a bundle of herbs each. Mossypaw took them and immediately began applying certain things to Riverstorm's scratches. The RiverClan warrior was unconscious. Sunpaw felt useless, just sitting there.

"What can I do to help you?" He asked the SkyClan medicine cat apprentice. She didn't even look at him.

"Pray that Riverstorm doesn't have the same fate as Brackenstar." She replied. Sunpaw was worried.

"Is it really that bad?" He asked. She glanced over at him as she worked.

"Look at him, Sunpaw!" She exclaimed. "Have you seen him? He's bloody and unconscious! Of course it's that bad!" Sunpaw suddenly felt very anxious. What if the RiverClan warrior didn't

survive? What would happen then?

"Let's Give Them All Dreams"

•Brackenstar•

Brackenstar opened his eyes. Where was he? What had happened? Then he remembered the battle. Why didn't his wounds hurt? He then remembered something else: he had submitted to the darkness. He looked around. He was in a soft nest of feathers and bracken. He glanced at his pelt. There was no blood or sign that any wound had ever been there. A cat purred behind him.
"Oh, Brackenstar." A voice said. Brackenstar turned around. Ashflower and Dawnmist sat there. Between Dawnmist's paws was a small, cream-colored tom. Brackenstar looked at the small body of his son in horror.
"Is that Wolfkit?" He asked in disbelief. Dawnmist nodded.
"He is not fully here yet. He is very weak, but he is not dead yet." She replied. She curled her tail around the small kit's body protectively. Brackenstar stared at her.
"Save him. Please, Dawnmist. Please, Ashflower. Save my poor kit. No kit should have to die at such a young age. *Please*." He begged. Ashflower said nothing, instead looking very worried. Dawnmist looked slightly confused.
"Don't you want Wolfkit to be here with us? Do you really want him to grow up with no parents?" She asked incredulously. Brackenstar shifted his paws.

"Does that mean I'm truly dead?" he asked, "because I'm not done with my life just yet. I have so much more to do. I'm not ready to come live here for good. Please. I need to live a little bit longer. I need to spend time with my kits. *All* of my kits. That includes Beepaw. Please. He needs me and I need him. I love you both, but I don't think it's my time yet. *Please.*" He pleaded. "And let Wolfkit live." He added with a glance at his son's pale, almost transparent body. Brackenstar saw hurt in Dawnmist's eyes, but he knew he needed to be in SkyClan right now.

"Brackenstar, not many get to do this." Ashflower began. She

tilted her head thoughtfully. "If it is truly your wish, you can go back to living world. You'll have to deal with the pain, though. You'll have a long journey to navigate before you are fully healed. Do you really want to experience that pain again?"

"I'm not a coward." Brackenstar nearly hissed. "It is my wish to go back to my Clan." He dipped his head to his first love. He looked around and realized that Dawnmist and Wolfkit were gone. "Please save Wolfkit." He added. "Dawnmist doesn't understand that Wolfkit has his whole life ahead of him. If he dies now, he'll never have a mate or become a warrior. Don't you understand Ashflower?"

Ashflower nodded. "I do understand, Brackenstar. I was afraid you would request this. The Elders of StarClan -Tall Shadow, Wind Runner, River Ripple, Clear Sky, Thunder, and Gray Wing- have only granted me permission to save one cat. I can risk saving you both, but the consequences might be quite harsh for you and for me. They said that it would be too much for me, both physically and mentally to save both of you. Do you want to risk it?"

Brackenstar shook his head. "I would love to, but I don't want to get you in trouble." He said. Ashflower pressed against him. She let out a slight purr.

"I suppose you'll want to say goodbye to Dawnmist and Wolfkit – well, what's here of him anyway – before we go?" She looked at him with her bright green eyes. He looked back at her.

"Ashflower, if you're going to save one cat, let it be Wolfkit." He closed his eyes for a moment. He felt her tense.

"Oh, Brackenstar. Are you sure?" He nodded. A few tears welled up in his eyes, making everything look blurry. One rolled down his face.

"At least let me say goodbye to Mistkit, Patchkit, Wolfkit, Beepaw, Mossypaw, Sunpaw, and Riverstorm." He mewed. Ashflower nodded.

"I think the Elders will allow that. We call them the Elders because they were the first ones in StarClan and they were the founders of the Clans." She replied. Brackenstar tilted his head and looked at her.

"If the tales they told in the nursery when we were kits are true, then I believe that the first cats in StarClan died in the First Great Battle. The first StarClan residents were not any of the Clan founders." He corrected her. Ashflower nodded again.

"The first cats here are so transparent that you can hardly see

them at all." She said. "The only reason they are still here is because the Advisory is taught all of the history of the Clans. They are taught to always remember the names of the first few generations in StarClan." She nuzzled against him quickly before pulling away. He scooted closer.

"May I say goodbye to my kin and my friends?" He asked. Ashflower jumped to her paws.

"Yes! Come with me!" She said. "I'll teach you how to make a living cat have prophetic dreams." Brackenstar jumped up to follow her. She led him to a small cave. When they stepped inside, something shimmered and glowed. Ashflower walked over to a pile of feathers. Each feather had something different about it, whether it was the color, size, shape, pattern, or any number of things. No two feathers were the same. Brackenstar stared around in wonder.

"What is this place?" He asked. "What are those feathers for?"

"There is a feather for each cat in the living world. Well, each cat in the Clans, anyway. Each feather is different and is somehow etched with something related to the cats name. Like this one is a jay's feather and its pattern is kind of stormy-looking. This must be Jaystorm of RiverClan's feather." Ashflower explained.

"How can you tell if it's a 'star, 'paw, or kit?" Brackenstar inquired.

"A leader's feather is kept in a pile in that corner, where there is a hole in the roof so it's 'near the stars.' Medicine cats are kept in that corner where the bioluminescent moss grow. Apprentice feathers are in a heap in the corner nearest to you. Kit feathers are in the only remaining corner. Warriors and elders are in this big pile in the middle of the cave." Ashflower pointed with her tail and showed Brackenstar each of the five piles of feathers.

"Should I start looking for my kits' feathers, then?" was all Brackenstar could say. Ashflower nodded.
"You'll know them when you see them. I'll look for Riverstorm's first." She mewed. Brackenstar began to sort through the pile of kits' feathers. He almost immediately picked up one that was patched. *This must be Patchkit's,* he thought. After a few minutes, he found a feather that was pale gray, like mist. That one had to be Mistkit's feather. He set it aside with the patched feather. It took him a few more moments, but then he finally saw a feather that was cream-colored, but the edges looked as though they had been dipped in blood. The feather was quite pale, as though it would fade away at

any moment. *Wolfkit's*, thought Brackenstar.

Ashflower nodded to him. "Go look for the apprentices' feathers." She said. "I'm still sorting through this massive pile for Riverstorm's feather."

Brackenstar went to the apprentices' feathers corner. He started to sort through the feathers when suddenly a thought struck him: "You said we are going to give them dreams, right? Does that mean I don't really get to be with them?" He asked. Ashflower shook her head.

"We are—well, I am—going to give each of them a dream telling them that they all need to meet at the same place. There, you will get to say goodbye to them." She explained.

"Okay." Brackenstar mewed. He continued his search for the feathers. He soon found a feather covered in moss (Mossypaw's), a feather yellow-and-black striped (Beepaw's), and a feather that was golden and shone like the sun (Sunpaw's). There was a pure white feather like the moon that kept sticking to Sunpaw's feather. "Oh get away!" Brackenstar exclaimed, pulling the white feather off for what seemed like the thousandth time. Ashflower looked over curiously.

"I wonder whose feather that is..." She commented. She held up a dark gray feather that on half it looked like the course of a river, and on the other half it looked swirled by a storm. "Definitely Riverstorm's feather." She decided. Brackenstar nodded.

"What do we do now?" He asked. "We have all the feathers."

"I'll show you," Ashflower replied. She walked into a small cavern at the back of the cave. She took Riverstorm's feather and put it on top of a rock glowing with the weird glowy moss. The moss shone even brighter for a moment before the whole room fell away. Ashflower turned to look at Brackenstar.

"Because I was the only one touching the feather, Riverstorm will only be able to see me. You will be invisible to him." She explained. Brackenstar just before they appeared in some kind of clearing. Riverstorm seemed to be running from Cranestar and Darkmist. He was getting slower and slower. The RiverClan leader and SkyClan Advisor were catching up to him. Brackenstar shuddered.

Ashflower stepped in front of the dark gray RiverClan warrior. He skidded to a halt. His enemies chasing him faded and disappeared.

"Ashflower, right?" Riverstorm said, dipping his head his head to the pale yellow she-cat. Ashflower nodded back, seeming to be quite surprised.

"How do you know my name?" She asked, her tail twitching. Riverstorm laughed and his blue eyes twinkled. Brackenstar watched in silent merriment. He remembered that Riverstorm's first Gathering as a 'paw was the one where Brackenstar had announced Ashflower's death. Riverstorm said as much to Ashflower.

"Well, Riverstorm. Are all the others with you?" Ashflower sniffed slightly haughtily. Riverstorm tilted his head.

"What 'others'? Like Beepaw, Sunpaw, Mossypaw, kind of others?" He queried. Ashflower nodded. Riverstorm nodded back. "Yes, they are here.

"Good. Take them to the ThunderClan camp. There Brackenstar's kits and bro- and Lightstar will meet you. Be there by dawn." Ashflower commanded. Riverstorm dipped his head and padded away. Ashflower turned to Brackenstar. "Well that was easy." She said. Brackenstar nodded.

"You almost said 'brother.'" He commented. "You know that's dangerous, Ashflower."

"Yes, Brackenstar. I know." She replied. Brackenstar nuzzled her cheek. Ashflower purred contentedly. "Now we need to get to the ThunderClan camp quickly."

"Are we going to give them another dream?" He asked. Ashflower shook her head.

"You are still breathing in the living world since you haven't officially made your decision to die." She said. Brackenstar winced at her last words. She flicked his ear with the tip of her tail. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. You can still go back into your body. You'll have to deal with the pain all over again, though." She warned him. Brackenstar nodded.

"It's okay. I'll be alright." He answered. "What do I have to do?

"I Had a Funny Dream Last Night After I Almost Died"

•Riverstorm•

Riverstorm woke up, still sweaty from his dream. He gasped in the cool, clean air. He inhaled and exhaled a few more times before he closed his eyes. He heard faint voices talking not too far away. He only caught snippets of the conversation:
"-storm comes around-"
"-miracle that he is-"
"-pray to StarClan-"
"-heavy breathing-"
"-hope and pray that-"
"-if he dies?"
"-fate is in the paws-"

Sunpaw and Mossypaw came around the corner of two thick oak trees. Riverstorm quickly pretended like he had just woken up. Sunpaw, delighted, called to Mossypaw, who was gathering up a few stray herbs. She hurried over, her mouth full of an assortment of leaves. She dropped them when she saw that Riverstorm's eyes were open.

"Is anything hurting? If so, where?" She started frantically checking him over, pressing herbs on to different spots, before changing her mind and putting them somewhere else. Riverstorm shook his head, trying to shake Mossypaw off him. His pain didn't matter now, he needed to carry out StarClan's wish.

"Need—go-go ThunderClan—camp—by-by—dawn. A-all of—us." It was a struggle to speak when everything was burning like a wildfire on his body. He was already blazing with pain, and more sparks flew when he talked. *There,* he thought. *I told them, StarClan. We'll be there by dawn.* But Mossypaw was shaking her head, a small smile on her pretty, tabby face.

"I don't know where you got that idea in your head, Riverstorm,

but you aren't going anywhere." Riverstorm gave a small hiss of annoyance.

"Star-StarClan—gave me—dream—last n-night." He said, hoping that Sunpaw might believe him. Sunpaw did indeed look intrigued by the thought of a dream from StarClan, but then his face hardened, obviously thinking of going back to ThunderClan. Riverstorm groaned inwardly.

"Maybe you just dreamed it." Mossypaw replied. "You're not a medicine cat."

So? Riverstorm wanted to retort. *Plenty of cats who have had prophetic dreams haven't been medicine cats. We've got to go!* Sunpaw, however, was starting to look thoughtful.

"Mossypaw," he began, "why *would* Riverstorm fake a dream saying to go to the ThunderClan camp? He has no business there, nor do you or Beepaw. Why would he want all of us to go there together?"

"A-Ash-Ashflower told—me there—would be—message—there." Riverstorm managed to say. Mossypaw started.

"How do you know who Ashflower is? Or was, should I say." She looked slightly furious, as though it was treasonous that Riverstorm should know who Ashflower was.

"My—first Ga-Gathering—she had—just d-died." He was again proud that he was able to speak a sentence without dying halfway through it.

"I think he's telling the truth, Mossypaw." Sunpaw interjected when she opened her mouth to say something. "If StarClan truly wants this, we had better go." Mossypaw glared at him, but then she dipped her head.

"I cannot disobey StarClan's wish. We will go at once. Sunpaw, would you, Beepaw, and Moonpaw carry Riverstorm on your backs?" Sunpaw nodded.

"I'll go tell the other two." He said. He hurried off toward two lumps across the clearing. Riverstorm saw him poke both of them. One leapt in the air. He tried to break out in a small purr, but it caught in his chest. He attempted to drag himself up to a sitting position, but he collapsed. Mossypaw rushed over, but Riverstorm shooed her away.

"I'll get—myself up, Mossypaw, but thanks." He said to the beautiful tabby she-cat. "Don't worry—about me. I'm stronger—than I look." He struggled to his paws again, and this time, to his surprise, he

stayed standing. He tried not to show his surprise to Mossypaw, though. He tried to take a few steps, and he was actually able to. He was a bit wobbly, but he could move alright.
"I don't need—to be carried, but support—might be nice if we're going—all the way to the ThunderClan camp." Mossypaw looked like she was about to protest, but Riverstorm shook his head and gave her a look. Riverstorm didn't know what kind of look he gave her, because he couldn't feel part of his face, but Mossypaw immediately backed down and even gave him a slight smile.
"Alright, Riverstorm. I trust your judgement. You are the one dealing with the pain, anyway." She purred and moved closer to him. Her scent wreathed around him. Riverstorm really hoped that the look he had given was not what could have been mistaken for love. She was right beside him now, and suddenly Riverstorm really missed Sorrelstream. She was the one who had been by his side for most of his life, the one who had befriended him when no one else would, the one who had never left him. Now, she was the one who loved him, and Riverstorm realized he loved her too. His heart filled with longing for his best friend and crush.
"Riverstorm," Mossypaw began as she launched into her dramatic speech. "You know I love you, don't you? You don't have to be unsure anymore. Riverstorm, I will happily join RiverClan and not be a medicine cat to be your mate. You know that, right?" She purred harder now. Riverstorm rolled his eyes. He struggled not to rude as he replied to her:
"Mossypaw, I do know. I am very sure—of your love. However, you have no—need to join RiverClan or give—up your role in your Clan for me." Riverstorm took a deep breath. "Mossypaw, I-I don't love you back. I don't now, and I don't—think I ever will. I'm sorry, but we can't be—mates if I don't feel the same way—about you. I am already taken. My friend from RiverClan—is the only one who will ever—have possession of my heart. I'm so sorry if you—thought that I loved you, Mossypaw. You are still a dear friend—to me after all we've been through—together, though." Mossypaw eyes had only been growing wider and rounder as Riverstorm. She stuttered as she began to speak again.

"I-it was just a dare. Bee-er-Sunpaw dared me when we in the clearing while I was-er-gathering herbs. You see, I-I don't feel that way about you, it was just a stupid prank." She kept fumbling over her words in a way that made Riverstorm feel as though she was

lying. He had heard part of the conversation between her and Sunpaw, and it had had nothing to do with a prank or dare. He curled his tail around and lifted up Mossypaw's chin, which was now wet with silent tears.

"Mossypaw, I've been watching you and how you treat me—and how you-er-treated Brackenstar. You loved your leader, and you love me now. There's no—shame in that, and I will always be your friend, if not your mate. You are bound to—the medicine code, and we both know you aren't—allowed to take a mate. Mossypaw, I hope you know—that I hold nothing against you, and that you are welcome to—talk to me anytime about anything at all. I will always be here—for you, Mossypaw, as one of your friends." Riverstorm sucked in a breath and held it as he waited for Mossypaw to reply. It finally came with a sob.

"You're right, Riverstorm. I know I'm bound to my code, and I know you're from a different Clan, and I know I'm only an apprentice, and I know I'm so much younger than you, and I know you don't love me. I know all the reasons that we can't be together, but it doesn't stop me from loving you." She hiccuped. "Or loving Brackenstar," she added softly. Riverstorm curled his tail around her shoulders now. He hugged her close. She sobbed into his chest fur, as she was only tall enough to reach his chest. Riverstorm had a feeling that most of those tears were for Brackenstar.

"It's okay, Mossypaw. I know you miss—Brackenstar, and I miss him, too. Maybe Ashflower has something good—planned for us at the ThunderClan camp. We'd better go—before Sunpaw comes and teases us." Mossypaw let a half-sob, half-purr, as Riverstorm stood up. She hauled herself to her paws as well, and they stood there for a moment, watching the moon high in the nighttime sky. Sunpaw, Beepaw, and Moonpaw came bounding up.

"Let's go! We've got to be there by dawn, right?" Sunpaw asked excitedly. Riverstorm nodded. Beepaw and Moonpaw stood on either side of him as they set toward Sunpaw's home. They were all silent for a while, each thinking something completely different than the others.

"There and Back Again: An Apprentice's Tale"

•Sunpaw•

Sunpaw trudged along. His thoughts were only of what would happen once he was, well, *home*. He was afraid. What if he was punished for running away? What if he had to go back to being a medicine cat apprentice? What if-if...anything? There were so many thoughts and questions running through Sunpaw's head, that he forgot to keep walking several times. Each time, Beepaw and Moonpaw asked him if he was okay. He wished that they would stop. Moonpaw walked close to him. Sunpaw wondered if Moonpaw's thoughts were anything like his own.
"What are you thinking about?" Moonpaw whispered. Sunpaw hesitated.
"I was thinking about what might happen once we're-er-home. What if they punish me? What if I'm stuck as a medicine cat apprentice? What if-what if..." He trailed off.
"What if nothing, Sunpaw? What if they welcome you with open paws, and purrs, and 'we missed you so much'es? What if everything is as it was before—before..." At this, Moonpaw trailed off too. They both knew what he meant couldn't happen. What if everything is as it was before Snowtail died? Well, it couldn't be, because Snowtail was dead and they were apprentices now. Sunpaw knew that his brother meant the happiness, but that couldn't happen either. No one could bring back Snowtail, not even the Elders of StarClan, and he knew that.
Sunpaw would give anything to see Snowtail again. He knew Moonpaw would too. Suddenly, as Sunpaw looked around, he smelled the familiar, yet almost strange scent of ThunderClan. Finally, they were at the border. The moon was still high in the sky, and the sky itself was still dark. Stars twinkled, seeming to mock Sunpaw. He groaned.

"Here we are," said Mossypaw.
"And we're early!" Beepaw said, he gave one small little purr of excitement, before he saw the look on Riverstorm and Sunpaw's faces. Moonpaw was the first one to step over the border, Sunpaw, the last.
"When we reach the camp, it might be better for me and Sunpaw to go first. We'll tell Lightstar about you guys, and then we'll come and get you, okay?" Everyone but Sunpaw nodded their heads.
"I'm not going in with you, Moonpaw. I'll stay with the others. I'll make sure a patrol doesn't come across them." Moonpaw made eye contact with him; they both knew the real reason he wasn't going first. They nodded at each other before they all set off for the camp. Sunpaw kept an eye out for patrols, and he knew Riverstorm was, too. Riverstorm was smart, however weak he might be right now. Along the way, Moonpaw said he thought he had heard a patrol, but it was just a couple of squirrels. Beepaw wanted to catch them, but Riverstorm reminded him that this was ThunderClan's territory. At last, the entrance to the camp was right in front of them. Sunpaw attempted to take a deep breath, but he just ended up gulping. Moonpaw took a step forward. He looked back at the group. "Well. This is it guys. Remember the plan." Everyone looked at each other. It was a funny thing to see, a motley assortment of cats from three different Clans. Sunpaw drew in an actually deep breath this time.
"Good luck." He said to his brother.
"Good luck."
"Good luck."
"Good luck," the others echoed. Moonpaw dipped his head and turned around to face the thorny entrance. He walked straight through the brambles. Sunpaw couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard low murmurs. Then he heard an exclamation of, "Moonpaw! MOONPAW!!" Sunpaw snorted. Beepaw purred slightly. Suddenly, Sunpaw heard this:

"You did *WHAT*? You brought cats from *WHERE*? SKYCLAN *AND* RIVERCLAN??" Sunpaw was pretty sure that this was his own father, Foxcatcher, screeching at Moonpaw. His brother's plan hadn't worked as well as they thought it would; of course it had to be Foxcatcher who first heard the news. The whole Clan must be up by now, what with that racket. Sunpaw rolled his eyes as Riverstorm gave him a questioning look.
"My father," Sunpaw said, "does not take things very well. Especially

when it involves other Clans and his son—me and Moonpaw. Believe it or not, that went quite well, from the sound of it."
Riverstorm nodded.
Finally there was silence in the camp. Moonpaw came bursting out of the thorn barrier, grinning. He beckoned with his tail for them to come in. Sunpaw waited for the others to go before he did. Moonpaw gave him a worried glance.
"I know you're worried, Sunpaw, and I hate to worry you more, but...I kind of didn't tell them that I have you with me."
Sunpaw felt sick to his stomach. He gulped.
"Thanks for everything, Moonpaw. You're a great brother and a great friend." He nuzzled his brother quickly before Moonpaw pulled away to go into the camp. Sunpaw took a deep breath and walked through the barrier after him.
As he pushed, through, he looked around. Nothing had changed in the few days that he had been absent. For a moment, each cat was completely silent, their eyes focused on the foreign cats from RiverClan and SkyClan. Then, one by one, each head turned toward Sunpaw. Finally, Lightstar stepped forward and dipped his head to Sunpaw.
"Greetings, Sunpaw. Welcome to the camp. I hope that you are here to stay this time." His greeting would probably seem cold to the rest of the Clan, but Sunpaw saw the warmth in it. Lightstar was sort of his uncle—his former mate was Sunpaw's aunt. He stared straight into his leader's eyes. He nodded, not meaning that he would stay, but that he understood. He was pretty sure that Lightstar got the message.

"Greetings, Lightstar. Thank you. My friends and I have a message from StarClan. We were told to be here by dawn." Sunpaw saw a stony look in Willowleaf's eyes in the moonlight. Riverstorm limped forward.

"I was the one who had the dream. I was told to meet you and Brackenstar's kits here along with Sunpaw, Moonpaw, Beepaw, and Mossypaw. I was told we would all receive a message here." He dipped his head to the ThunderClan leader. Lightstar looked curious.

"Mossypaw and Beepaw, you are from SkyClan, yes?" The SkyClan apprentices nodded. Lightstar turned to Stormheart, the deputy, next to him and whispered something. The deputy turned to the rest of Clan and said something quietly. All the cats turned back

to their dens. Soon, they were all alone in the clearing with the ThunderClan leader. Lightstar cleared his throat and continued. "May I ask what you were doing out of your territory with two ThunderClan apprentices and a RiverClan warrior?" Mossypaw and Beepaw exchanged glances. Beepaw nodded and began to speak.

"After we were here with Brackenstar to drop off his kits, Brackenstar said he needed to take a little walk before going back to camp. He told us to go back to camp, but we insisted on going with him, for safety reasons. We found a little stream-" Sunpaw fidgeted uncomfortably. "-and there, Brackenstar rescued Sunpaw from drowning." Lightstar raised an eyebrow at Sunpaw. Sunpaw shook his head. *Not now,* he mouthed. "We were then 'taken hostage' by these she-cats who called themselves the Descendants. There, we met Riverstorm. Then Cranestar showed up and he tried to kill Riverstorm, but Brackenstar fought him. Brackenstar-Brackenstar-he...he-" Beepaw broke off.

"He died there." Mossypaw said bluntly. Beepaw nodded. Lightstar looked at them in horror.

"No!" He cried. "No, no, no. It can't be. Tell me it's not true. No..." Lightstar's voice broke on the last words. He was wide-eyed. Tears slid down his face and stained his pure-white fur. Sunpaw had never seen his leader like this before. Then he remembered the conversation only a few days ago, when he and Brackenstar had told Sunpaw that they were brothers. It was no wonder why Lightstar was so devastated. "No...no..." Lightstar kept saying. "No..." He finally looked up, wet tracks smearing his snow-like fur. "Go on." He choked. Beepaw hesitated before continuing.

"Riverstorm was—is—battered from fighting Cranestar and a dark tom that none of us had ever seen before. He almost died."

"I might still." Riverstorm interrupted. Beepaw purred slightly. He went on.

"Then he told us that he had had a dream from StarClan, as he told you. So we came here." He finished. Lightstar sniffed slightly.

"Thank you." He half-whispered. "But where is Brackenstar's body?" He asked. Sunpaw shifted. It was Moonpaw who answered.

"We never got his body. The Descendant she-cats took him, and I think they were going to take care of him. We had to run away, because of Cranestar and that dark tom." He bowed his head. The sky was lightening overhead.

"It's almost dawn." This phrase seemed to echo around the group

of cats sitting in the clearing. Suddenly, Riverstorm jumped to his paws, a little unsteadily.

"We need to have Brackenstar's kits here with us!" He exclaimed. Lightstar nodded. He practically ran to the nursery. Sunpaw heard scuffling from inside, and a moment later, three kits came stumbling out, blinking sleepily. He heard Lightstar murmering to them. They were unsteady on their small paws. *They must be brand new*, Sunpaw thought, watching their trembling, lopsided gait. Lightstar brought them over.

"This is Wolfkit," he said, jabbing his tail in the direction of the cream-colored tom. Wolfkit seemed to be the runt of the litter. "Patchkit," Lightstar continued, moving to the patched ginger kit; "And last but not least, Mistkit," he pointed to the last kit, who was a fiery orange, like her father. Sunpaw purred; her personality seemed to be as fiery as her pelt. She tried to bite Lightstar's tail when it came close to her. All of the sudden, they heard a rustling outside the camp. Every single cat sitting in the clearing gasped. The cat who came limping through into the ThunderClan camp was someone who should have been dead. It was someone who was supposed to be lying dead in the Descendants camp. It was someone who had once been SkyClan's leader. It was someone whose two mates were sitting in StarClan, where his own spirit should be lying. It was someone who had broken the laws of the Elders of StarClan. It was someone who was somehow alive, and yet his son was, too. It was someone whose brother sat watching him with disbelief. It was Brackenstar.

"And They Thought I Was Dead"

•Brackenstar•

Brackenstar limped into the ThunderClan camp. Yes, *limped,* like with *pain*, into the physical, earthly ThunderClan camp. Brackenstar grinned at the shocked faces staring at him, in his bedraggled, half-dead, but *physical* body. He limped forward a little more. For a moment, Lightstar and Brackenstar stared at each other. Finally, Lightstar spoke one word.
"How?" He whispered. Brackenstar laughed. It was a good feeling, being able to feel his body, feel himself speak, feel the pain, no matter how much it hurt.
"StarClan is letting me say goodbye. They let me choose between saving myself and Wolfkit, and I chose Wolfkit." Wolfkit looked up into his father's eyes very solemnly. Brackenstar smiled at his smallest kit.
"Thank you." Wolfkit said quietly. Brackenstar dipped his head. Wolfkit coughed; the motion wracking his entire little body. As Brackenstar looked closer, he could see the outline of his kit's ribs. Patchkit and Mistkit came bounding up to him. Their eyes were barely open, but they looked up at him with round, wide eyes. Brackenstar purred a rasping, broken purr. Lightstar suddenly stood up and came bounding toward him.

"You really are alive? This isn't a dream?" Lightstar asked incredulously. He reached out and flicked Brackenstar's shoulder with his tail. He jumped back when his tail made contact. Brackenstar laughed again. He was relishing the feeling of being in a body again, no matter how torn and half-dead it was.
"I'm not necessarily alive, but I am here in my earthly body. I am only here to say goodbye. Tomorrow, I will be watching you from StarClan's hunting grounds. They are quite beautiful, you know." He joked. He limped closer to his brother. "I'm only allowed to be here

for a limited time, so I'd better get going with the goodbyes." He bent down and touched noses with Patchkit, and then with Mistkit. Lastly, he rubbed against the frail little Wolfkit's cheek. Brackenstar inhaled the scent of his beloved kits.
"Goodbye my precious kits. Your mother and I will be waiting in StarClan for you."
"But why do we have to wait? Why can't you be with us *now*?" Curious little Patchkit gazed at her father, her eyes round. Brackenstar held her gaze with solemn eyes. He tried to crack a smile, but all that came was a few salty tears.

"Oh, Patchkit. I would stay with you if I could, but StarClan wants me to stay with them, and I can't disobey their wish. I'm sorry, my kit." He replied. Now it was Mistkit's turn to ask questions.

"Is StarClan where the dead cats go?" She asked, rather bluntly. Brackenstar chuckled a broken, half-sob of a laugh.

"That's where the good dead cats go. The bad ones go to the Place of No Stars. The first Tigerstar and Hawkfrost went there, along with many others." He laugh-sobbed again at the look of amazement on Mistkit and Patchkit's faces.

"If the cats in StarClan are dead, doesn't that mean you will be, too?" Wolfkit inquired softly. Brackenstar looked at his son sadly. "I already am, my son. I am only here for a short goodbye." He murmured. Brackenstar looked up at his brother. Lightstar stood watching him with glistening green eyes. The ThunderClan leader took a step toward Brackenstar. Then he buried his face in Brackenstar's neck.

"Oh, brother." He lamented, not caring about the shocked faces of Beepaw, Mossypaw, and Riverstorm. "Who did this to you? I want to avenge your death. I want to banish them from the Clans forever. I want them to know that I will not tolerate them murdering my fellow leader, my family, my littermate, my *brother*, for StarClan's sake. I will maul them and rip them to shreds if I have to." Lightstar was shaking with anger now, a green fire lit in his blazing emerald eyes. His fur was on end and his claws were out. His tail was bushed. Brackenstar shook his head. Mossypaw rounded on Brackenstar.

"Lightstar is *your brother*?!" Mossypaw screeched. Brackenstar looked around in alarm. A few heads had poked their way out of their nest, and they were watching. Brackenstar tried to signal to

his Clanmate to stop. She hissed at him.

"Mossypaw, please. You don't understand." The orange tom pleaded. Mossypaw glared and hissed again. Beepaw murmured something in her ear. She leapt to her paws, spitting with anger. She growled at Beepaw. He sighed.

"I understand perfectly well what you mean. You're telling me that the leader of ThunderClan is YOUR BROTHER! How many more Clan leaders are your brother? Or maybe your deputy? You're only half SkyClan! Are you even SkyClan at all?" Mossypaw swished her tail, as though that finalized her words. Beepaw gasped. She opened her mouth to speak again, but Beepaw beat her to it,

"Mossypaw! Stop it! Do know what you are doing?" He stood up and looked her in the eye. "Look around. Isn't this enough? Haven't you caused enough damage already? Stop before you hurt anyone else." She held her chin high.

"I'm not sorry. This war is not done." With that, the tabby she-cat stomped away, out of the ThunderClan camp. Brackenstar sighed. "I'd better go talk to her-"

"No, Brackenstar. You aren't the leader anymore. Let Beepaw go." Lightstar said rather firmly, but it was in a gentle way. He put his tail in front of Brackenstar. Brackenstar just watched the tabby apprentice go, wondering how his Clan would react.

"I'm sorry, Lightstar. I should have never let you say that. I should have stopped her. She will never be satisfied until all the Clans know. I know her, Lightstar, and she will not let this go." Brackenstar sighed heavily.

"You were helpless in this situation, Brackenstar. You couldn't have done anything." Lightstar replied. Just then, Beepaw came running back to the camp.

"I tracked her scent. She's already on her way to the border. I'm not as fast as her, so I just let her go. I'm sorry, Brackenstar." He said, dipping his head to his leader. Brackenstar shook his head.

"It's okay. I'm sure the Clans would have found out at some point, anyway." He beckoned the orange-and-white apprentice closer. "Beepaw, when we got back to camp, I was going to have Bloomshade make Mossypaw a full medicine cat. Will you tell Bloomshade that I still want to happen?" Beepaw nodded. Brackensar continued. "Good. Beepaw, I was also going to make you a warrior, to honor your bravery and your courage. I was going to name you Beesplotch, for your patches, and because my warrior

name was Brackensplotch, and I see so much of me in you. I hope that you will tell Shellshine that I told you this. You will make a fine warrior, my little bee. Make SkyClan proud. And when the time comes, you can join me in StarClan, and we can watch over our beloved Clan together."

The other cats in the clearing were keeping a respectful distance. Brackenstar bent closer to the young tom. "I love you, Beepaw. You are like a son to me. You *are* my son. I wouldn't trade you for all the kits in the world. Bee, you mean the world to me and I wish I could stay with you on this earth. Before my time is up, I want to tell you a few things. First of all, no, I have no SkyClan blood, except for my kits—and you. Lightstar is my brother. We are half-Clan. Our mother is RiverClan, and our father is ThunderClan.

"Second," Brackenstar hesitated, but he knew it was time to tell his beloved adopted kit. Beepaw was watching with wide eyes. "I know who your father is, even though the Clan does not. Your father, Bee, is in the Advisory. He is Darkmist, Advisor for SkyClan. I'm sorry, my bee, but he is not a father to be proud of. You saw my state when I came back to camp after visiting the Advisory, yes?" Beepaw nodded.

"Did Darkmist do that to you?" He asked. Brackenstar nodded slowly.

"Yes, your father did that to me. You saw that dark tom that helped Cranestar attack me?" Beepaw nodded again. His eyes were round, and his fur was bushed slightly.

"My *father* helped kill you?" Beepaw asked angrily. Brackenstar sighed.

"Darkmist did indeed help kill me. My dear kit, I'm sorry that you have to live with your father's reputation hanging over your own head. I'm so sorry I even told you this."

"It's okay, Brackenstar. I'm glad you told me this, and I'm glad that I know who my father is, now. The thing is, I will never see him as my father. Brackenstar, you are the one who raised me and tended to me and played with me like I was your own kit. I feel like your kit, and you just told me I *am* your kit to you. Brackenstar, who's the one who taught me to pounce on the queens' tails?"

"Me."

"Who's the one who played with me when no other kit would?"

"Me."

"Who's the one who loved me unconditionally, even when I

wanted my real father, and not him?"

"Me."

"Who was the one who raised me, who loved me, who *adopted* me, as his own son?"

"Me." Came the repeated reply of Brackenstar. Brackenstar's eyes filled with tears. Beepaw leaned on his shoulder.

"Brackenstar, *you* are my father, and you always will be. I wish with my whole heart that you could stay here on this earth, but I know that it's your time, and I will respect that. I love you, Brackenstar, and I will never forget you. Thank you, so so much for what you told me." Beepaw got very choked up on the last sentence. He took a deep breath.

"Brackenstar, I will accept the name Beesplotch, not because you said you wanted me to be named that, but because I want to be named after you. I want your memory to live forever, and if having the same warrior name as you does it, then do be it. I am honored to have the same name as you, Brackenstar. I love you, and I will miss you." Beepaw's eyes were glistening. Brackenstar was pretty sure his own were wet.

"Thank you, Beepaw." Brackenstar turned to Riverstorm. "Riverstorm, you are such a brave warrior. I will make sure that StarClan does not forget that you almost died for me. You deserve so much better than what Cranestar has given you." Brackenstar stepped close to the gray warrior. He whispered in Riverstorm's ear. "Riverstorm, I've seen how Sorrelstream looks at you at Gatherings. I wish you two the best. I think that she will be very happy to see you when you get back to your camp." Brackenstar's eyes twinkled.

"Thank you, Brackenstar. That means a lot to me." Riverstorm purred slightly. Brackenstar wondered if he was thinking about Sorrelstream. The SkyClan leader purred too. He looked at the last cat to say goodbye to: Sunpaw.

"Sunpaw, I think that making friends and traveling beyond Clan borders has changed you. You are still seven moons old, but you have gained wisdom beyond your age. I have seen you grow up so much in these past few days. You have gone from a naive, immature young kit who tried to drown himself, to a compassionate, honest apprentice who looks out for his friends and cares deeply about them. Sunpaw, I can't wait to see what you choose to do in the future. I'm sorry for what you've had to endure, but I think your experiences will help you later in life. I'm proud of

you, Sunpaw. Keep going in this direction, and you will be a good warrior." Brackenstar looked the golden-furred apprentice straight in the eye. Sunpaw dipped his head.

"Thanks, Brackenstar." He whispered hoarsely. "Thank you." Brackenstar looked around at all the cats in front of him.

"Tell Mossypaw that I will miss her. Goodbye, my friends. I will miss you all more than you know. I am so glad that I have had the pleasure to meet each of you and share at least a few days together." Brackenstar looked away for a moment. "I can't believe that I have to say goodbye so soon. My kits, my Clanmates, my friends, and my brother. I will miss you like crazy, but know that I will watch over from Silverpelt each night."

With these final words, Brackenstar turned toward the camp entrance and limped out, not looking back. He was going to start a new life now.

"Do I Have to Hear About His Daddy Issues?"

•Riverstorm•

Riverstorm stared after the small, limping form of Brackenstar until he was lost from sight. The gray warrior was so thankful for the SkyClan leader. He had given Riverstorm what the RiverClan tom wanted most: to know that he still had a chance with Sorrelstream. Riverstorm was longing for his best friend and maybe future mate. He wanted to get home as soon as possible.
"Come on, Riverstorm. I'll have Willowleaf get you fixed up. I think you probably want to get home soon, yes?" Lightstar looked at the gray warrior with a twinkle in his eye. Clearly Brackenstar wasn't the only one who had noticed at Gatherings. Riverstorm nodded. He followed the ThunderClan leader into the small little cave of a medicine den. Willowleaf sat inside, tidying her herbs. Lightstar cleared his throat when they walked in. Willowleaf looked up, clearly frustrated.
"I just lost my count!" She hissed irritably. She swished her tail impatiently. "What do you want?" She added, apparently still not seeing Riverstorm. Lightstar stepped aside and flicked his tail at the foreign warrior. The pretty medicine cat's eyes widened. "Lightstar! What are you thinking, bringing an enemy warrior into the heart of our camp?! You might as well introduce him to the kits and queens next!" She then relaxed slightly (*very* slightly); Riverstorm wondered if she had seen the dried blood crusting his neck and leg.
"I was wondering if you could treat my friend, here. Willowleaf, this is Riverstorm. Riverstorm, Willowleaf." Lightstar said. Willowleaf nodded to Riverstorm, though her tail was still swishing.
"Come here then, let's take a look at you." Willowleaf sniffed around the RiverClan warrior's leg, and then his neck, and then the rest of his body. The she-cat stared out into the clearing for a moment. She turned to look at Riverstorm again. "I recognize a SkyClan method

on you. Was it that tabby, whatsherface, er, Mossypaw, that treated you?" When Riverstorm nodded, the light brown she-cat began to lick the poultice off of his pelt.
"I know Mossypaw is a medicine cat for a reason, but SkyClan methods are no good when it comes to stopping infection. Marigold and horsetail ought to do it, and they go and use fennel and rosemary. What good is that going to do?! Even when it comes to staunching blood, they use moss instead of cobwebs! Those fools." Willowleaf growled. Riverstorm realized that as she had talked (complained) his ears off, she had been making and applying fresh new poultices. The stinging slowly stopped, as the marigold and horsetail set in. Riverstorm sighed with relief. Willowleaf was right: he hadn't felt this good with 'the SkyClan method.' She looked him in the eye, as though asking him what he thought.
"It's good." He replied. 'It feels good. Thank you." Willowleaf nodded stiffly and turned back to her leaf sorting. He stared at the grumpy she-cat's back. Somehow, Willowleaf seemed lonely. Riverstorm wondered what had made her this way. He thought about this as he backed out of the medicine den and looked at the gathered Clan in the clearing. Lightstar made his way over, and leapt on top of a tall ledge. The Highledge, ThunderClan called it. Lightstar cleared his throat. All murmurs in the Clan below ceased immediately. It was obvious that Lightstar was greatly respected.
"Cats of ThunderClan, I have many pieces of news for you. First, Brackenstar is dead, and Shellshine will soon be taking over as leader."
"How did he die?" Riverstorm heard a faint murmur from the back of the crowd; Lightstar had obviously heard it too, because he stopped and looked down.
"How, you ask? That brings me to the second piece of news. Cranestar and a dark tom from the Advisory are responsible for my- I mean the SkyClan leader's death. Cranestar is not to be trusted, and we must warn the other Clans. RiverClan, of course, already knows, as they have seen Cranestar's-" Lightstar paused "-strange behavior lately and are full aware of the threat he poses. I heard from this young warrior-" He nodded at Riverstorm "-that many of the senior warriors witnessed Cranestar try to murder him. By the way, that's the third thing. This is Riverstorm, and I want a few volunteers to escort him to his territory. This is for your own safety," Lightstar added, before Riverstorm could protest. "I don't

think that any apprentice should be out of the camp without a warrior with them, no kit shall leave the camp, and patrols will have at least three members. Basically, if you're going out of camp, have at least one other cat with you.
"Fourth, Sunpaw and Moonpaw are home-" Lightstar was cut off by angry yowling from the apprentices' father. Lightstar silenced him with a flick of his tail. "Sunpaw and Moonpaw are home safely, thanks to Riverstorm, Brackenstar, and Beepaw and Mossypaw of SkyClan. I thank you very much, Riverstorm. Moonpaw, I want you to change all the apprentices' bedding until the next Gathering. You are being punished because you worried your father sick, and you simply just ran away without telling anyone or bringing a warrior with you. I would have been happy to help you search for your brother. However, I do appreciate your concern for your brother, and I'm sure he does too.
"Now, Sunpaw. I am not going to punish you, because-"
"What?! That's not fair!" Moonpaw yowled. Lightstar held up a paw.
"Because," he began again, "I think that you suffered enough already. I am deeply sorry that I forced you to become a medicine cat apprentice. I only did so because Willowleaf suggested it, and I trust her judgement because she has been right about these sorts of things in the past. Sunpaw, I am going to give you the option to remain training as a medicine cat, or return to being a warrior apprentice. If you do decide to train as a warrior again, you will have some catching up to do. Do you understand?" Lightstar looked the small golden tom right in the eyes. Sunpaw nodded.
"Take a few days to decide, so that you are not as rash as the other night." Lightstar's eyes twinkled. Sunpaw nodded again, and Riverstorm saw him knead the ground in embarrassment. Lightstar looked down at Riverstorm, and they exchanged an amused glance. Lightstar turned to the crowd again.
"Fifth, before SkyClan can share this news with you all, I would like to tell you, as it concerns me. A long time ago—okay, I guess I'm not *that* old—A while ago, there were three kits born to a RiverClan she-cat, and a ThunderClan tom." Riverstorm noticed that a gray warrior fidgeted, as though uncomfortable, but Lightstar apparently didn't see. He kept going. "There was a gray tom, a mostly orange tom, and a white tom. As you may have guessed, I was that white tom, Lightkit. My brothers were Rockkit and Brackenkit. We were named by our adopted Clans. The eldest of us, Rockkit was given to

the Advisory, as is customary. Brackenkit was given to SkyClan, and I remained in ThunderClan. Our mother, the RiverClan she-cat, also happened to be a medicine cat. *The* medicine cat. Yes, my mother is Birdtail. My father is still unknown, though I know that he is one of two gray toms sitting in front of me."

Riverstorm noticed that the same gray warrior fidgeted again. He definitely looked old enough to be Lightstar's father. The other gray warrior—ThunderClan's deputy, Stormheart—just looked confused.

Lightstar continued, still not seeing. "You all might have figured out that Brackenkit grew up to be one of the greatest warriors SkyClan has ever seen: Brackenstar. Sadly, our other brother, Rocksplitter was killed, ironically, by a falling boulder that crushed him. Now I am the only one of my litter left." Lightstar looked at down at his Clan. "Stormheart, Stoneclaw, will you please step forward." The two gray warriors did as they were told, Stormheart still looking confused, and Stoneclaw looking nervous, as he had been while sitting in the crowd. Lightstar took a deep breath. He looked about as nervous as his senior warrior.

"I think it's time for the Clans to know what happened all those moons ago. Whichever one of you is my father, will you please, for my sake, step up and tell me?"

Both toms sighed, but it was Stormheart who stepped forward. He glanced at his fellow warrior beside him and spoke. "It was I, Lightstar. I am your father." The entire Clan gasped, Stoneclaw's eyes widened and his mouth fell open, and Icewing, Stormheart's current mate, yowled, "How could you?" Lightstar drew in another sharp breath. Riverstorm was simply shocked.

"To be honest, that's not who I was expecting. My deputy is my father." He turned to Stoneclaw as the senior warrior struggled to get words out of his mouth. "Yes?" Stoneclaw spluttered for a moment before he finally seemed to find his voice.

"Lightstar, it wasn't him. He's only ever had one mate, Icewing. Have you ever seen me have a mate? No. But I've told you I lost kits many moons ago. Stormheart was still an apprentice when you were born, I was a warrior. Yes, Birdtail and I were young and in love. Stormheart was still padding after Icewing, who was in the litter born before his. It was me and Birdtail who broke the warrior code. I am too tied to ThunderClan, and she's a medicine cat, bound to her duties. So we settled for giving up the kits we had. I lost two kits, Rockkit and Brackenkit, but I still had one kit with me.

Lightstar, I am logically the only cat who *could* be your father, and I am." The gray tom's legs were visibly shaking, but his face held a look of utmost confidence. Now it was Lightstar who looked confused.
"Stoneclaw—but Storm—how..." The white tom turned to his deputy. "Stormheart?" The dark warrior looked just as shocked as rest of the Clan. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Riverstorm exchanged a glance with Lightstar. The leader was clearly just as bewildered as him. "Riverstorm, I think it's time you go home. I will tell you everything at the next
Gathering. Hollypelt?" He nodded to a black she-cat. "Will you take another warrior and escort Riverstorm to the RiverClan border?" The she-cat—Hollypelt—dipped her head and murmured something to another warrior. They both came over to Riverstorm.

"I am Hollypelt and this is Briarpool. We are going to take you home. Please lean on one of us for support if you need it." Riverstorm nodded and they silently slipped out of the camp. None of them said anything, and soon they were at the familiar border. The RiverClan tom dipped his head in thanks.

"Thank you for taking me here. I will be fine from here. Give Lightstar my thanks and say goodbye." The two she-cats nodded to him and turned back toward their own territory. Riverstorm sniffed the cool air, relishing the breeze amidst the bright skies. He was finally home, he was going to tell Sorrelstream how much he loved her, and he was going to rid the Clans of Cranestar for once and for all.

"It's Good and Bad to Be Home"

•Sunpaw•

Sunpaw watched in dismay as his only friend besides his brother left the camp. He struggled to pay attention to the rest of the Clan meeting, though Moonpaw told him everything in their nests that night. Apparently, Lightstar was going to go to the Moonpool to consult StarClan about who was actually his father. Sunpaw honestly didn't care at this point. Too much was racing through his mind, each thought faster than the last, trying to win first place. Sunpaw wanted the race to end already, but he was still aching for answers. He decided to get up and go to Willowleaf. As he entered the medicine cat's den, she whipped around like usual, her expression just as fierce, but something softened when she saw Sunpaw.

"Hey, Sunpaw." She said, her tone even less cool. "What do you need?" Sunpaw gulped nervously.

"Answers." He finally replied. She cocked her head, and Sunpaw soon found himself pouring out everything that had happened. Words came tumbling out like a rush of water, and the streams of sentences flowed freely. Soon, he felt wet tears slide down his cheek. Willowleaf listened intently to it all. After he had finished, she looked toward the stars for a moment. She then sighed and looked the golden apprentice in the eye.

"I think StarClan would only send you visions if you were meant for something very great. Your mother, well honestly Sunpaw, I have no idea why StarClan would take your mother, but StarClan does everything for a purpose. Brackenstar coming back to his body is a miracle, and my guess is that StarClan had not yet proclaimed him dead, so he was still able to go back to his body. As for your career, Sunpaw, I just want to say that I am very sorry. I think I made a grave mistake when I told you to become a medicine cat. I think that you are destined to be a warrior. I can just imagine you in battle, now. Please consider what I've told you. And Sunpaw, I

know that I have been terrible to you this past moon, and I'm so sorry. Sunpaw, you've become like a son to me and I will miss you in my den, but this is not your destiny." Willowleaf was crying too, and Sunpaw was astounded. He was shocked at her current behavior, but he was so thankful for her words. Willowleaf leaned toward Sunpaw and hugged him close. He embraced her, and they sat cuddled close for a long time.

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When Sunpaw awoke the next day, he blinked for a moment before he realized that he was in the ThunderClan medicine den. He and Willowleaf had cuddled up in her nest together, and Sunpaw had fallen asleep. Willowleaf wasn't in the nest now, but she was in the den sorting herbs. She muttered a quick "Mornin'" before going back to her work. Sunpaw could have sworn that she had just sorted her herbs yesterday. Barkpaw was still asleep. Sunpaw was still a little fazed by Willowleaf's behavior last night. She had been indifferent to him this morning. Sunpaw hurriedly out of the den to go talk to Lightstar. As he neared the den, Lightstar and Stormheart beckoned him closer.

"Well, Sunny, you sure caused a ruckus coming home yesterday. I'm grateful that you're back, though." Lightstar rested his tail tip on Sunpaw's shoulder. Sunpaw purred in acknowledgement.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm going to train as a warrior again." Sunpaw held his head high as Stormheart looked skeptical.

"Are you sure that's best?" The deputy asked. "You've missed more than a quarter moon of training."

"Yeah. Are you sure you don't want to sit around and sniff herbs all day while we hunt and fight for you? Or are you going to run off again at the first sign of battle?" Dustpaw whispered in Sunpaw's ear and sneered as he walked past. "If I were you, I would stay in that dusty old den."

"Says you whose name is 'Dustpaw!'" Sunpaw retorted quietly. He looked around to see if Stormheart and Lightstar had heard, but they were watching with sparkling eyes. Dustpaw glared at Sunpaw with those cold, pale eyes.

"What did Dustpaw say to you?" Lightstar asked, as the dusky brown tom walked off, tail held high. Sunpaw began to speak, but then he stopped. He didn't want to be a snitch or create tension.

"He was—was just welcoming me back to the apprentices' den." Sunpaw decided to say. "He said he was glad that I didn't have to mess around with dusty old herbs, now. I just pointed out that his name is literally 'Dustpaw.'" He fake-chuckled, as though trying to make his point. Lightstar nodded. Sunpaw breathed a sigh of relief, as it seemed the leaders of the Clan believed him.
"So are you going to be a warrior apprentice?" Stormheart asked.
Sunpaw nodded.
"I'll go alert Briarpool." Lightstar said, but Sunpaw shook his head.
"May I?" He asked, and Lightstar dipped his head.
"Very well." The white tom replied. Sunpaw raced off to the warriors' den. He picked his way around the nests until he got to Briarpool's near the back of the den. Briarpool was one of the senior warriors, but she preferred a nest at the back of the den. The younger warriors were fine with that.
"Briarpool!" Sunpaw hissed. "Briarpool! It's time to go train!" Briarpool blinked sleepily, but once she saw Sunpaw's face, she leapt up and rubbed her muzzle against the top of his head.
"Oh Sunpaw! I've missed you so much! Are you going to be my apprentice again?" She bounced around like an apprentice fresh out of the nursery. Sunpaw nodded, and she purred so loud that another warrior woke up and scolded her. They both just laughed at the warrior. "Oakpool, I do *not* care! I have my apprentice again!" Briarpool playfully hissed at her brother—Oakpool. He only growled back softly before curling up and falling asleep again. Briarpool dashed out of the den, then turned around and swished her tail.
"Well? What are you waiting for? Come on! We're going to train!" She kneaded the ground as Sunpaw picked his way through the nests a little more carefully. He grinned at she purred again, even louder this time. They both raced for the camp entrance.
"Where are we going?" Sunpaw asked. Briarpool didn't reply, but kept running until they reached the training hollow. She took a deep breath.
"Let's tussle." She finally answered, preparing to leap at him, but he beat her to it, leaping onto her back. She yowled, but Sunpaw knew she was just messing with him—literally. They play-fought until Sunpaw's stomach growled so loud that Briarpool sat up and laughed. The sun was high in the sky by then. "Let's take a break and eat. Then we'll hunt." Sunpaw was too hungry to disagree,

though he was aching to practice his stalking again. They raced each other back to camp, and Briarpool barely won. They slowed at they approached the camp entrance.

"Sunpaw, I think that you have grown a lot since you were last home—both physically and mentally. While you still have a lot of growing to do, you cheeky little mouse-brain, you've matured a lot since I last saw you. You seem bigger, too, more powerful in a way." Briarpool, stopped, as though admiring his thick, golden fur that shown like the sun he was named after. Sunpaw felt embarrassed by her praise, and his pelt prickled self-consciously.

"Er-thanks, Briarpool. We'd er-better er-get back to camp." His stomach growled again, as if on cue. "I could eat a badger." He added awkwardly, and Briarpool laughed, her eyes seeming to sparkle again. Sunpaw suddenly thought that she looked rather beautiful. He looked away and his fur felt hot.

Mouse-brain, he thought. *She's my mentor, and besides, I'm still an apprentice.* Another part of his brain argued with him, though. *She's not* that *much older than you, and you're not going to be an apprentice forever...maybe she sees you like that, too?* Sunpaw shook his head to clear the thought away, but he couldn't stop staring at her tortoiseshell pelt as he devoured a thrush. It seemed to taste extra good as he sat next to his mentor.

She scooted a little closer. "Do you want a bite of my lark in exchange for some thrush?" She came even closer, and added, "I know you like lark." Sunpaw felt hotter and pricklier than ever, and he mumbled a quick, "sure," before passing his thrush to her. He had to admit that the lark was quite good. They spent the rest of sunhigh exchanging their prey and catching up about the events of the past few days. It felt like Sunpaw had been gone for a lifetime. He suddenly missed his companions very intensely.

"Are you okay, Sunny?" Briarpool pressed close to him, her eyes round. "It seems like a lifetime doesn't it?" Her voice grew soft, and Sunpaw ached with gratitude for her warm body against his. He couldn't reply, but he nuzzled her thankfully. Briarpool seemed to understand, and she just sat there with him. The sun was starting to set by the time they got up. A couple other warriors were looking at them funny. Briarpool glared at them, and they turned away. Sunpaw just closed his eyes and pressed against her, not really caring, but grieving, for Brackenstar, for SkyClan's loss, for who-knows-what. They sat down again, and they stayed there until

about moonhigh. Sunpaw finally got up and stretched, bones aching. He was surprised to see that his mentor wasn't asleep; the pretty tortoiseshell simply yawned and stood up with him.

"Want to go for a nighttime hunt?" She whispered. Sunpaw nodded and raced for dirtplace tunnel. "Why there?" She asked, as she bounded across the clearing beside him.

"I don't want to be questioned by Mouseblaze, who's guarding right now. I just want to slip away." *And be with you and you alone,* he added in his mind. He shook his head for the second time that day. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Do you seriously have a crush on your mentor?? Do know how incredibly stupid and pathetic and desperate that is?* He sniffed, checking for prey scent, trying to chase away his thoughts of more than a mentor-apprentice relationship. Briarpool didn't say anything, but she followed him into woods as he began to track a rabbit. She turned and dashed off to circle around and cut off the rabbit's escape route—she was letting Sunpaw make the kill.

He nodded to her and crouched down for wait for it. *It must have strayed from the moor,* he thought absently. Suddenly, a very alarmed looking rabbit came crashing through the bushes, with Briarpool on its heels. Sunpaw dashed forward to cut it off and kill it. He leapt, and grabbed it in his teeth, holding it down with his forepaws. As he tried to bit down on its neck, it kicked him hard in the stomach. He gasped and let go. Briarpool caught it and killed it, before running to check on him.

"I'm okay." He said, before she could ask. She snorted.

"That's not what I was going to say actually. I was going to say that the rabbit might make a good ThunderClan warrior; it seemed as though it was hunting you." She started laughing, but Sunpaw looked down at his paws sullenly. "I'm sorry Sunny, don't be upset. I'm not shaming you at all, it was just a little funny to watch a rabbit hunt its hunter. Don't worry, I still caught it. We'll bring back fresh-kill for the Clan at dawn!" She nuzzled him and purred. He felt a little better as they dragged the huge rabbit into camp as the sun rose above the dark green treetops. Briarpool said he could rest until sunhigh, when they would begin training again.

As he laid down in his nest, Briarpool came in to sleep by him. "There's no one in here but you and me, and there's no one in the warrior's den, so who's going to judge? I'm just here to spend time with my apprentice—and best friend." She purred and cuddled up next to him to sleep. Sunpaw was grateful to have her beside him,

but he felt a pang of disappointment. *Stupid,* he told himself again. *I'm so stupid to think that she would ever like a little brat like me. I'm just her friend.* He did have to admit that it felt nice that he was her *best* friend. Now he was two friends besides his own kin.

He breathed her comforting scent—like lavender and honey—before starting to drift off to sleep. It seemed like his life was turning a corner. It really did feel that way. Sunpaw inhaled lavender again before breaking away from the conscious world. Maybe in his dreams he would be as happy as in that moment.

A/N: Is anyone else getting Draco Malfoy vibes from Dustpaw?? Is it just me? Also, what do y'all think of the development with Sunpaw's relationships with Willowleaf, Lightstar, and Briarpool? I think this is going to be good for Sunpaw. What do you guys think?

Also, if anyone is shipping Sun x Briar, Briarpool was only just made an apprentice when Sunpaw was born, so they are only six moons apart. If anyone ships Sun x Willow, that's just a no-no. The age difference = □. Willowleaf is old enough to be his mom.

I'm not saying that Sun x Briar is going to be canon, unless I am convinced by you guys, the readers. Let's say five comments (from separate users, no alt accounts) saying yes to this makes it canon.
Edit: I like this ship XD The above statement is void.

May StarClan light your path as always,
-Fawn

"I Guess I'm Actually Dead"

•Brackenstar•

Brackenstar padded away from his brother's Clan with a heavy heart. He already missed his companions terribly. He limped forward until he reached the lake. *Welp, here goes.* He tossed himself into the lake, and snorted as he thought of Sunpaw and his foolishness only a couple days before. *I really hope Riverstorm can rid the Clans of Cranestar.* He sighed and tried to resist his need for air. He kept pushing down. Soon, he blacked out and woke up in StarClan. Ashflower was waiting for him.
"Was it successful? Did you find them?" She asked, kindly but slightly impatiently. Brackenstar nodded, gasping for air.
"Yes. It was hard leaving, though. I'm going to miss them all so much." He broke off, unable to say anymore. He wasn't sure what to say if he was going to say anything else. He sighed, and finally continued with, "I guess Shellshine's ceremony will be soon. The sun has already set since I was there. Ashflower snorted.

"You think she can walk that fast? Stupid furball!" She purred and nudged him affectionately. Then she grew serious. "Brack, I-I wanted to apologize for all those moons ago." He looked back at her, a little confused.

"Why...?" He asked tentatively. She leaned in.

"I-I should have seen the danger in Darkmist. I...He...I-Well honestly, Brackenstar, I think Beepaw *is* your son. Think, he looks nothing like me—pale gray with blue eyes—or Darkmist—dark with pale amber eyes. Brackenstar, he's the spitting image of you. I know, we...we wanted kits...and well..." She trailed off, blushing. Brackenstar looked away, pelt hot. He was remembering that night moons ago, and he suspected she was too. They had wanted kits together so badly, but they thought that would never happen. Then Darkmist came to the Clan and Ashflower instantly fell for him. They became mates and had kits, and all but Beepaw had died before even taking their first breath. Ashflower, too, had died.

"Whatever happened to the other three kits?" Brackenstar asked softly. "Are they here with you, in StarClan? Did you ever name them?" Ashflower nodded and turned back to him.
"Yes, they are here with me, and well...yes, they have names, but..." Ashflower looked away. Brackenstar brushed his tail across her ear and rested his chin on the top of her head.

"What? You can tell me anything. You know that." He touched his nose to hers. "What is it?"

"I-er-well...I don't know." She paused before burying her face into his chest. "Oh, Brack, those kits were never supposed to happen. Darkmist...I thought he was so handsome, and I fell for him, before I saw the real him. By then, he wanted to have kits with me, but I-I...I..." She stopped, tears leaving wet tracks down her pale gray face. "Brack, I tried to tell him I-I couldn't have kits, didn't *want* them, but-but he wouldn't listen. He said that if StarClan wanted us to have kits, then-then I would. Oh, Brack, I was so scared. I tried to tell him no, but he insisted. He-he forced StarClan's will on me, and..." Ashflower stopped again, now sobbing. Brackenstar cuddled her close.

"It's okay, now. Ashflower, you *had* kits. It was a miracle! You were never supposed to have them! Remember the Clan was so happy for you-and-and me? Remember they thought the kits were mine? We were so happy, despite knowing they were that treacherous rat's. Don't you remember that joy?

"And remember when you gave birth. I was right beside you the entire time, we were so excited. We were young and in love, so happy, so oblivious to the world around us. Don't you remember, Ash?" Ashflower smiled a little bit, and Brackenstar simply sat there, holding her. After what seemed like hours, she finally replied with a small, whispered, "I remember. I remember it all, Brackenstar. I—no, we—were so happy." She purred a sad, broken purr, but Brackenstar filled in the lonely little gaps for her with his own purr.

"We were so happy." He repeated. Then he looked at her. "What are the other three's names? What do they look like?" He asked softly. She purred a little harder now.

"Beetlekit, Waspkit, and Flykit. The latter two are gray-and-white, while Beetlekit is dark, like...like that horrid rat. All boys, just as lively as Beepaw. Waspkit is a little shyer than his brothers, but he'll join in their games, and he learns quickly. If he was...alive,

he would make a fine warrior. They all would." She broke off yet again, her sentences crumbling away as she built the stories in her mind again. Brackenstar knew only one thing would help her right now, and that was going to see the kits. He beckoned her away from the ground.

"Where do the kits usually like to play?" He asked. She pointed with her tail rather numbly to a bush several tail-lengths away. Brackenstar herded to the bush, and sure enough, he saw flashes of gray, white, and dark brown as the three brothers scuffled. Brackenstar cleared his throat. They stopped and looked up.

"Kits, this is Brackenstar, the late leader of SkyClan, where we would have lived, if you had lived, those nine moons ago. Brackenstar...is your father." Brackenstar could tell Ashflower was struggling to appear composed. She forcefully purred when Flykit nuzzled her. Brackenstar barely remembered to not shudder as he looked Beetlekit in the eye. Darkmist's son was the spitting image of his father, just as Beepaw was, Brackenstar. The small, dark kit bared his teeth at Brackenstar and lunged at him. Suddenly he seemed to turn into Darkmist, and Brackenstar felt helpless, just like the night his arch-nemesis had almost killed him. Brackenstar blinked and shook his head. When he looked at Beetlekit again, the kit was simply sitting there, staring at Brackenstar as though he had sprouted a tail out of the top of his head. Brackenstar tried to smile, attempting to reassure the small kit that he wasn't crazy, but the small, orange tom couldn't shake away the image of Darkmist snarling at him.

For the rest of the day, Brackenstar couldn't look Beetlekit in the eye again. He jumped at every little noise, and when Ashflower flicked him on the shoulder with her tail, asking if he was okay, he leapt up and hissed. She flinched and pulled away. He hurriedly pressed close to her. "I'm sorry, Ashflower, but-" He leaned in. "-it's Beetlekit. I can't-I mean I...Ashflower, every time I look at him, I get flashbacks to a quarter moon ago, when he—I mean Darkmist—almost killed me. Sooner or later, the poor kit will realize I'm not his father, and wonder why everyone stares at him, like he's the maniac his father turned out to be. Ashflower, I can't help seeing his father when I look at him, but I know he's innocent. There must be some way to save him from this. I'm sorry." His voice broke and became hoarse, as tears welled up in his eyes. "I'm so sorry. So, so sorry."

"I know, Brackenstar. It happens to me, too. I love him, but he...I...Darkmist...well, Brack, I think that he is my punishment for falling for Darkmist's trap. I thought he was so handsome, so kind, so caring...*I* was so naive. I'm sorry, Brackenstar. You were the faithful one, you never stopped loving me, you were there through it all, you...you were—are—everything I've ever needed. I know you have a mate, but Brackenstar, I wish...I wish that we could start over. I wish those kits were all yours, and I-I wish that Beetlekit didn't look anything like Darkmist." She pressed against him. All three kits stopped and looked at them.
"I wish that, too, Ashflower, except for the last thing. They are the way they are meant to be, and I would never change that, despite...despite..." Brackenstar was aware that the kits were listening. "...despite the circumstances. I do love Dawnmist, but...like you said, I never stopped loving you." The kits were still listening wide-eyed.
"What are you talking about?" The boldest of the three was, of course, Beetlekit. "Are you talking about us behind our backs?" He narrowed his eyes the exact same way Darkmist did. Only pale slits were visible, and Brackenstar was transported, yet again, to that night a quarter moon ago. He shook his head and stared back at the small kit. He didn't answer his question.
"Let's a-hope Darkmist's son don't follow in his pawsteps, aye?" A new voice reached Brackenstar's ears. "Ya fear him, and for his future, don't ya?" A white tom stood, facing Brackenstar. He dipped his head to the orange tom. "Don't be scared o' his offspring, now. He can't do not'in', now can 'e? Not now, but later. Worry later, now, good, sir. Enjoy ya time now, Brackenstar."

"I Love You, Too"

•Riverstorm•

Riverstorm stepped across the WindClan and RiverClan border. He inhaled deeply. *Home.* He said goodbye and thanked the ThunderClan patrol, and attempted to run to his camp. He was still quite injured, so his run was more of a speed-walk with a slight drag of the hind-leg. When he finally reached the camp, he snuck through the dirtplace tunnel instead of just going through the camp entrance. He was afraid that Cranestar would 'make an example of him' in front of the Clan. He padded behind all of the dens, until he got to the warrior's den. He hissed twice and stomped his foot (rather softly), before settling down to wait. This was the signal that he and Sorrelstream had made up when they wanted to sneak out of camp together.

Several minutes later, a very astonished Sorrelstream peered around the corner. Riverstorm quickly put his tail up to his mouth, trying to tell her not to make a sound. She mouthed what looked like, *Where? How? Who?* He grinned. *I'll answer later*, he mouthed back, *For now we need to get out of here.*

Before your father can try to murder me again, he added in his mind. He led the way back around the dens, and out through the dirtplace. He padded a little way further, into a small thicket. He turned around to make sure Sorrelstream was following him, but she had suddenly disappeared. His heart beat quicker. Did Cranestar just take her to get back at Riverstorm? Suddenly, he heard a little *whoosh*, and he felt weight on his back. He crumpled to ground, trying to roll his attacker off. A purr sounded in his ear.

"I had you worried, didn't I?" Sorrelstream purred harder, and he swiped at her playfully.

"Off. Ger'off you great lump!" He twisted around so that he could look at her. She nuzzled him and purred again.

"Who's calling me a great lump? You're twice the size of me, you big badger!" She laughed, and her eyes sparkled. He bit her ear

softly, and she pretended to keel over, dead. This time it was him who laughed. Then she stopped and looked down at him. "Where were you? How did you get injured? Who did this to you?" She looked at him, apparently very worried.

"I was beyond Clan borders, in a clearing where these she-cats called the Descendants live. There, Cranestar and a dark tom called Darkmist found us—me, Brackenstar, and a couple of apprentices—and they attacked me and Brackenstar. The SkyClan leader, er, *died* in that battle, and I...almost died. One of the SkyClan apprentices, Mossypaw, helped save my life." Riverstorm stopped for a moment, trying to catch his breath.

"Then I will forever be grateful to her, to Brackenstar, to all of them, for keeping you safe. And...I'm sorry my father almost took your life. You must know that I wish that he wasn't my father." Sorrelstream nuzzled him again. Riverstorm touched his nose to hers.

"I know that. After I almost died, we went to the ThunderClan camp, where Brackenstar came back from the dead and said goodbye to us before basically just dying again. Then a ThunderClan patrol took me to the WindClan-RiverClan border, and I walked—er, limped—here to find you." He purred and licked her ear.

"To find me? You came here just to find me?" Her eyes were round with surprise.

"Of course. You're really my only friend, and..." He looked away, pelt hot. She leaned closer.

"What? And what?" She asked quietly. He turned back to her and took a deep breath.

"And...well, Sorrelstream, I love you. Not just as my best friend, but so, so much more." He looked her in the eye, waiting for her response. Her eyes were even rounder now.

Her voice went a little hoarse, as she asked, "Are you serious? Riverstorm, are you...do you...you seriously love me?" He looked her straight in the eye, and answered her confidently.
"Yes. Sorrelstream, I love you, and I hope that you love me, too. If you do, I hope that we can be mates." He looked away afterwards, a little embarrassed. Sorrelstream, on the other paw, looked ecstatic.
"Oh, River, yes, I love you! Yes, yes, yes, a million times! Yes, we can be mates! I can't even tell you how long I have been waiting for this. Riverstorm, I've turned down Tornclaw and both of your foster

brothers, in hopes for this moment. Yes!!" She nuzzled him and purred very loudly and hard.

"Sorrelstream, there's only one problem. I can't go back to the camp. Cranestar will kill me! He's already tried!" Riverstorm looked at her, serious. She, however, simply purred.

"My father isn't in the camp, silly. He's been missing as long as you have! Remember, he chased you out of camp? He tracked you down, but he still hasn't returned home. You can be there, for now. Come on, let's go home!" She started to get up, but Riverstorm pulled her back down.

"Not yet. I like this, just you and me. Just a little bit longer." He licked her affectionately. She didn't argue, but laid down next to him, tucked in her paws, and purred.

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Riverstorm blinked open his eyes. He purred when he remembered he was home. He looked around. Sorrelstream wasn't lying next to him anymore. He got up quickly, collapsed because everything hurt, and then looked around wildly. A purr sounded in his ear.

"Did you think that I left you?" Sorrelstream's amber eyes sparkled. Riverstorm's own blue ones shone back.

"Maybe..." He replied, happier than he'd been in moons. She laughed and pushed him away playfully. He scooted back over to her. She paid him no attention, but shook her head.

"You fish-brain, you. I would never leave, you. I promise I will always be here for you." She jumped to her paws. "Come on, you lazy sack of bones. Let's get back to camp! Don't worry, I'll go first to make sure everything is okay." She added, nudging him to his paws. He scrambled up, a little painfully, and followed her. He stopped for a moment and inhaled a deep breath of her sweet, honey-like scent. She, too, stopped and turned to stare at him.

"What are you waiting for? Are you itching to hunt or something?" She sniffed and kept going, not waiting for a response. Riverstorm let her sweet scent guide him and lead his paws. Soon, they were at the RiverClan camp entrance. Sorrelstream pressed against him as he took a deep, shuddering breath.

"You ready?" She asked. He nodded, though his stomach told him otherwise. He struggled not to show it. She nodded back and

touched her nose to his, pulling away with a loving glance. Then she stepped through the entrance. A moment later, she reappeared. "Come on, River! It's clear!" He padded through, and the entire Clan seemed to turn as one.

A collective, "Riverstorm!" was heard as many cats raced to greet him. Pantherfur was in front, her belly starting to swell with her unborn kits. She purred and touched noses with him.

"Welcome home, River, I mean Riverstorm." She looked around at the Clan for a moment, but Riverstorm just purred. He rubbed against her.

"It's good to be home, Panther." She looked slightly taken aback, but then she laughed, and shook her head.

"I missed you, little brother." She said. He swiped at her playfully. The rest of the Clan started to break up and move away, except Sorrelstream. She simply sat, watching.

"I am barely younger than you! Literally by a few minutes!" He protested. She dodged his soft blows and purred.

"You were the youngest in our litter of four, though. Me being the oldest, of course." She tussled with him for a moment, before she pulled away sides heaving. "These kits make me tired easily." She complained. Sorrelstream laughed a little.

"Makes me not want to have kits." She said, with a sly glance at Riverstorm. He looked at her sharply.

"You don't want kits?" He asked, terrified of her answer. She nudged him.

"I'm just kidding. Of course I do, Riverstorm." She pressed against him. He began to purr. Pantherfur gave him a questioning look. She shook her head.

"You two are closer than I thought you were." She smirked at him. "When did this happen? My little brother's all grown up, now." He pulled away and play-fought with her again. She laughed at him. "So, my brother found himself a girl at last, aye?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I found someone, and now we're mates." He gave Sorrelstream the most loving glance, and she buried her face in his chest fur. He could feel her purring, and he cuddled her close. He looked around. This was his home, and he was going to save it from Cranestar and Darkmist. He was home, in the RiverClan camp at last. He had his sister, and his best friend was also his mate. He was going to rid the Clans of Cranestar for once and for all. This was his home, and he was home.

Trivia

[image]

-This book was started sometime towards the end of 2022, and it was completed April 16, 2024.

-Sunpaw's warrior name was originally going to be Sunfall, and he was going to become Sunstar, but I realized that was canon.

-Riverstorm was originally going to be Birdtail and Stoneclaw/ Stormheart's son instead of Brackenstar, Lightstar, and Rocksplitter. He didn't become a pair of loners' son until I actually wrote that part of the book.

-I originally shipped BrackenMoss (Brackenstar x Mossypaw), but the age difference disturbed me...

-This book's name was originally going to be *Forbidden Love*. The arc name was going to be *New Peace.* It just didn't fit.

-The Descendants weren't even a thought in mind until the chapter came up where they were introduced.

-The Advisory is my own creation. Each Advisor helps give advice to the leader of their Clan. They have a direct connection to StarClan, even stronger than that of a medicine cat. Having the Advisory allows medicine cats to focus on their healing duties more than they were able to before the Advisory was made.

-The prophecy about the making of the Advisory was only mentioned in this book, but it will play a very big role is the third and last book of the series.

-Yes, Ashflower is supposedly infertile, but Darkmist forces her to have his kits, by basically abusing the power of StarClan.

-Cranestar only hates Riverstorm because he is getting old, and he's going a *little* crazy.

-Sorrelstream always saw her father, Cranestar, for what he has become as a crazy old tom. Her mother, Sandtail, refused to see what he truly was/is. That's why she never had a good relationship with him or her.

Thanks, guys, for all the support! I have had so much fun writing this book. The beginning of Book Two, *A Hidden Reed*, will come out on May 24th. Thank you all, and I'll see you then!

May StarClan light your path, as always,
-Fawn

Bonus Chapter - Beepaw's Warrior Ceremony

Beepaw was almost giddy with excitement. He was sad that his adoptive father wasn't here to see it, but today, right now, was his big moment. He looked up at the newly named Shellstar. Pebblefall, the new deputy, sat beside her. Beepaw took a deep breath and stepped forward. Shellstar smiled at him.
"I, Shellstar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. He has trained in the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you in his turn. Beepaw," she looked down at him, "do promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
Beepaw breathed in deep again. *This is it.* He looked Shellstar in the eye. "I do." He said confidently.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give your warrior name. From this moment forward, you shall be known as-" Shellstar broke off as Beepaw opened his mouth. "-Yes?"

"May I please be named in honor of Brackenstar?" He asked, a little embarrassed. Shellstar seemed to be holding in a laugh.

"Yes...what do you want to be called?" She asked. Beepaw stared at her, eyes shining.

"Beesplotch." He said firmly. Shellstar nodded.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, you shall be known as Beesplotch. StarClan honors your courage and compassion." She touched noses to his. The Clan cheered. Beesplotch looked at the sky, where the stars should be. *I did, Brackenstar, I did it.*